

GUY S. STANTON III



AGENT
with a
HISTORY

AGENT WITH A HISTORY

Book One
of
The Agents for Good

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Table of Contents

Full Moon

Rundown

Deep Water

Long Night

Locksmith

Strung Up

Bare

Homecoming

Mystery Man

Lifeline

Tenderness

Dark Water

Ready for More

Frustration

Decision of the Heart

New Life

Late Start

*Dedicated to all the women out there
in the world, who have fought to overcome
the adversity of past abuses. May you all
experience abundant joy, healing, and
the love you were always
meant to have.*

Chapter One

Full Moon

It was going to be another one of those nights. Every time there was a full moon you could expect something out of the ordinary was going to take place, but this was just plain weird, I thought to myself, as I stepped into the abandoned warehouse located near the east pier.

Crazies invading the precinct, cult worshipers enacting bizarre ritual sacrifices of their neighbors' cats, psycho killers starting their manifest destinies and so on, were all to be expected at this time of the lunar cycle, but this was different than the usual fare. In fact, it was downright eerie, I thought, as I stepped through the doorway into the space beyond. It was as if I had never left the Fifth Precinct.

Everything had been copied, down to the smallest detail. They even had the captain's coffee mug sitting on the corner of his desk. As I walked by, I glanced into it. It actually had coffee in it.

The déjà vu feeling just wouldn't leave me. Who would go to such lengths, not to mention expense, to build such a life size replica of the Fifth Precinct? I saw detective Rafferty ahead of me. His head lifted and he smiled as he saw me.

"I know, creepy, isn't it Lisa?"

I nodded. "Have you found any reason why someone would go to such great lengths as this?"

"No, and even less as to finding out what any of this has to do with our victim's murder. There's evidence that the framework for the walls was done by a staging company located not far from here. Some of their trucks showed up about an hour ago. The drivers' said they'd received word to come break everything down and pack it away. They said they were tasked to build this place over two weeks ago. The outfit that hired them did so by long distance. They never met a representative of the company. Said everything was paid for up front and that a completion bonus was wired into their accounts yesterday morning with a request to dismantle and destroy what they had been asked to build."

"Did they give us a name?" I asked.

"East Coast Mid-Atlantic Erectors, Inc." Detective Salieazar said, stepping up beside his partner Rafferty. "I checked into them. Turns out they've been out of business for over three years and there's been no recent activity by a company of that name either. Whoever did this knew not only how to cover their tracks, but to eliminate them entirely!"

"Didn't the staging company express any concern when they saw the nature of what they were asked to build?" I asked.

Sal shrugged. "They said they were told it was a film set for a cop show and they were paid enough not to be too interested, if you know what I mean."

"Dig a little deeper and see if you can find anything." I said. Glancing back to Rafferty I asked "Any witnesses?"

Both detectives glanced at each other with a look that said they knew I wouldn't like what I heard. Sal spoke, "Just one so far, a homeless man. He shacks up sometimes in the warehouse across the street. He said he saw five unmarked black vans pull up outside yesterday morning. From his description about forty people piled out of the vans dressed mostly as cops. Later, he said, a black sedan pulled up and a man got out. He watched the man go to the trunk and pull a body out, sling it over his shoulder and disappear into the warehouse with it."

"Was he able to give you descriptions of anyone?" I asked.

Rafferty grimaced slightly. "Not really. He said they looked like cops. I've got him with a sketch

artist right now, should he be able to remember anything, but there's something you should know about him. We found a lot of drug paraphernalia on him and he's still slightly high."

Darkly, I realized this was what they hadn't wanted to tell me. A high profile case and the only eye witness that we had was a homeless man that was most likely high on drugs at the time. That wouldn't go over well with the DA.

I sighed and then noticed them both share that look again. "What else?" I asked expectantly.

Sal hesitated and then blurted out, "Our eye witness said he was too afraid to leave, so he stayed. He said that at about 2:00 in the afternoon two more vans pulled up. A bunch of women got out. He said they were strippers."

"Strippers? What would they need with that many strippers in a replica of the precinct?"

Sal turned to Rafferty, "You didn't show her everything yet, did you?"

"Show me what?" I asked impatiently.

Rafferty turned around and gestured for me to follow. He gestured to the left and right as we walked. "They pretty much copied home base down to a T. The space comes complete with holding cell and interrogation rooms. There is some evidence of one cell having been used and we're having a full run up done on it."

He stopped in front of the elevator doors, "This part here, well it's different than the office."

"That would be putting it mildly." Sal added, as Rafferty punched the button for the elevator.

Instead of the small cramped space of the elevator bay that one would expect, there was a larger darkened space beyond the doors. I stepped into the space.

Rafferty hit a switch on the wall and the space beyond the elevator doors lit up, as garish strobe lights re-enacted the atmosphere of a stripper joint, complete with blaring techno music. This night was only getting stranger.

I looked around, noticing something familiar about the setting. Had I been somewhere like this before?

Sal interrupted my thoughts. "Yeah, you've been here before, or there I should say. It was that stripper joint where that under-aged girl got knocked off last year. I believe they called the joint, The Gentlemen's Groan. It appears to be an exact replica of it."

I gave him a piercing look and he fumbled adding, "From what I remember, that is, of the investigation."

Yeah right, I thought to myself, as I turned away to inspect the room. Sal's weaknesses were well known throughout the office.

What could all this mean, I thought to myself? I had a dead Iraqi civilian and a complete model of my very own precinct, along with a night club lounge.

Yesterday, at 4:30pm, an Iraqi born citizen had stumbled into the office and made a wild report about being held hostage in an abandoned warehouse, in an elaborately set up hoax, as he had put it. It had seemed a little too much to be believed, but a report was filed anyway to be checked by a patrol cop later.

Earlier tonight, at a little past ten, Ahmed Sazzar was found dead in his hotel suite. He had been cruelly tortured for what had appeared to be hours, and then his neck had been broken. His murder had prompted us to look into the report filed earlier in the day, and this was where it had led.

Instead of providing answers, all it had done was raise more questions.

I had looked into Ahmed's past, but had come up with little to go on. He had emigrated from Iraq a few years back, and he had no ties with any terrorist activity that anyone was aware of, or was telling me anyway. Ahmed didn't strike me as a bomb maker though. By all appearances, he had come to America for the long haul. He had married an American woman last year and had no history of wrong

doing or violence. He had been an antiquities dealer in Iraq, and had also dabbled in the archeological field as an ethno linguist.

Upon moving to the United States five years previously, he had dropped the antiquities business in favor of a job at one of the cities' prominent museums where he had helped manage the Middle Eastern collection.

It had been a good job and his finances had all been in order and accounted for, with no debts to speak of. He seemed to be both the model citizen and husband.

The people at the museum had nothing but good to say about him. In their words, he was one of the best hires they had ever made.

Why then had he been so brutally tortured and then killed?

He likely would have died just from the injuries sustained during the torture. Snapping his neck almost seemed symbolic somehow.

Something else that bothered me about the whole torture scene was that it appeared that he had been gagged the entire time. The torture had been sadistically carried out in his hotel suite and yet no one had heard his screams of pain, which confirmed that he had been gagged the entire time. It seemed more like a ritualistic killing than it did a quest to find out information.

His wife had discovered what was left of his body and I could still remember the quiet horror I had seen reflected in her almost vacant gaze. Her life would never be the same after witnessing the body of her husband torn apart in the perceived sanctity of their room.

I had seen many grisly sights like that one before, but not many that had been worse. I pushed the dark images away and came back to the present.

My working hypothesis had been that the most likely cause for such a brutal murder, given the absence of seemingly anything in the present, was that the murder stemmed from something that had occurred in his antiquities dealing past. Perhaps he had cheated someone or stolen something. Grave robbers and the underworld of the illegal antiquities market weren't good people to tick off.

They were more than capable of doing something like that to someone to make a point, but this elaborate sting operation didn't seem to fit their M.O.

This place had cost a small fortune to build and accessorize, only to be torn down two weeks later. Who had these kinds of resources and would go to such great lengths to gain information without torture? It seemed more government related than thieves' world.

Was this something to do with terrorist activity?

I doubted it. Because if it was, some higher up brass would already be crawling all over my investigation, essentially taking control of it. If the people who had built this place had tortured Ahmed, why had they allowed him to awake from a drug induced slumber and walk out of here, only to torture him later?

They'd had all the opportunity in the world to torture him as they pleased in this deserted warehouse, and yet they hadn't. They'd spent thousands of dollars to get information without the use of torture.

That didn't even sound like the government, come to think of it. It was clear that there was a third party involved, and my head was beginning to ache with the possibilities.

The blaring music and lights were only making my emerging headache worse. I needed sleep, but sleep had been hard to come by recently. Old nightmares had been haunting me again.

The brutality of this case wasn't likely to positively aid my sleeping efforts either. I glanced around once more. So many people had worked to make this elaborate operation come about.

People?

I swung around and addressed Rafferty, "How did you say the homeless man described the two groups of people? The first group of people looked like cops and the second group were strippers?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding his head looking puzzled.

“He didn’t say they looked like strippers, but instead that they were strippers in actuality?” I asked by way of definition.

“Yeah, that’s the way he said it. He seemed to think that they actually were strippers,” Rafferty said.

I had something to go on now.

“Sal, I want you to continue digging deeper into this fictitious company and see if you can find out where the wire transfer originated. Rafferty, you and I are visiting the night club district, in particular The Gentlemen’s Groan.”

“Hey, why do I get stuck with the paperwork and you guys get to have all the fun?” Sal whined.

My eyebrows quirked up as I smiled imperially, “I’m not sure I know what you mean, Sal? I don’t bend that way and Rafferty is a family man.”

Sal’s face reddened slightly, but he muttered, “You know what I meant.”

“And I know that I need an objective partner and not just an interested onlooker.” I reproofed firmly, and he shuffled off quickly away from us.

My eyes met Rafferty’s, only to see a slight reproof in them, “That was a little hard, don’t ya’ think?”

“Not at all. He gets on my nerves sometimes,” I responded heatedly.

“Pretty much everything’s been getting on your nerves lately. Want to tell me what’s going on?”

I pushed past him instead, “Come on. You’re starting to make me regret not taking Sal instead of you.”

“Ouch!” he said good naturedly, as I brushed past him.

I winced inwardly. That had been mean of me to say and it hadn’t been right how I had cut Sal, even if he had deserved it. Neither man deserved my bad mood.

Rafferty and I were almost to my car when Sal came running up, waving a paper. “You’ve got to see this!” He thrust the paper into my hands and my eyes widened.

“Who?” I asked, looking up shocked.

“The homeless guy! Can you believe it?” Sal exclaimed.

I couldn’t actually. I walked back into the phony precinct to where the homeless man sat at a desk with the sketch artist’s supplies laid out before him.

I flipped the paper around and asked, still not quite believing it, “You drew this?”

He ducked his head down a little in awkwardness and nodded before saying, “I used to be something of an artist in another life.”

I flipped the paper back over and stared at it for a moment before looking back up at the homeless artist and addressing him, “I don’t know how life has let you down to be where you are now, but I don’t think the world of art is done with you, should you wish to try it again. Thank you for this!”

His cheeks flushed a little red above his scraggly beard and he husked out a low, “Thank you”.

I looked down at the picture he had drawn. The silhouette of a sleek black sedan formed the background that outlined the tall striding figure of a man in the foreground. He was a white male, deep tan and well over 6’ in height. He was dressed in a suit and was in the process of an easy stride forward that bespoke of a man confidently within his element. His eyes were shielded by a pair of dark aviator glasses of a simple classic design. His shoulders were broad and in general, if the picture was accurate, he was a big man. As impressive as his powerful athletic build was, what was most captivating about the man were the intangibles that seemed to leap off the page at me.

I got several quick impressions. First was that this was a dangerous man. He had the poise that bespoke experience and a perceived intelligence that said he was quick on his feet, able to easily

adapt to a new situation.

He was, in a word, perhaps the most intimidating man I had ever seen, other than my father. Where had he gotten such a poised bearing?

Military?

CIA or something like it or was he closer to a soldier of fortune type? It was hard to say.

He appeared to be a little of all of them and something else more ancient. If I had to say a word that encapsulated him as well as the picture seemed to, it was: warrior.

I looked up at the homeless artist, "Earlier, when my fellow detectives questioned you they said that you didn't remember most of the people. Why do you have such a vivid memory of this man?"

He shrugged. "The others were like pigeons, seen one you've seen them all. But him, he had a real presence. You don't see many people like that, not anymore."

He looked up at me speculatively and then added, "You have a strong presence too. Mind if I do a sketch?" he asked, as he reached for the sketch pad in front of him.

I felt my face flush slightly at his offer and I quickly said, "No, no, I have to be going. Perhaps some other time, but I do appreciate the offer. Now, we are going to keep you in custody for a little while. It's for your own protection. This case has gotten a lot bigger and I'm not quite sure what or who is involved yet and as you are our only witness you could be in a lot of danger."

He held up a hand. "Can I get some food and keep this sketch pad?"

"Absolutely!"

I turned to Sal, "On it boss," he said.

He turned to go, but I reached out and grasped him by the forearm quickly, "I'm sorry for what I said earlier."

He shrugged and a smile flashed out at me, "I've got thick skin, don't worry about it. I'll get that research for ya and see if any of the data bases comes up with anything on this guy in the sketch."

"Thanks," I said, as I continued on to the car with Rafferty.

Chapter Two

Rundown

The doorman looked like he was about to object to my front-on approach so I flashed him my badge and he did a double-take. I was used to it. For whatever reason, no one ever seemed to place me as being a cop.

I had a friend tell me once that I looked like I should have been some wealthy millionaire's mistress instead of wasting myself on the life of being a cop.

Needless to say, we hadn't kept close since then. I had few enough friends without losing another, but I seriously didn't need one who thought my higher calling in life should be as someone's mistress.

I walked into the oh, so familiar atmosphere of the strip club. Talk about déjà vu, only this time the place was populated.

I winced slightly, as my headache took it up a notch in time with the loud music and strobe lights. I really did need to get some sleep.

I made my way through the ranks of glazed eyed men. The place was packed and I had to shove my way through the pressed throng to make headway. Rafferty hurried to keep up with me, and I slowed down some.

I was forever making the short Irish man hurry to catch up with me. I couldn't help it that my walk was really more of a stride than a step. I was 5'11". Some said that I was blessed with long legs, but cursed with a short amount of patience for getting where I wanted to be, which right now was backstage.

A guy's hand off to my right flashed out to, no doubt, grope my butt as I passed by, but I intercepted it with a quick grasp by my own hand. I snapped his hand over and put pressure on his arm. I had the satisfaction of watching his face turn white with pain at my hold. Served him right, the boorish lout!

"Keep your hands to yourself next time," I spit out, as I continued on through the crowd, not bothering to glance back.

Rafferty stopped briefly beside the man, who had just fallen prey to Lisa's temper. The man was feeling at his shoulder with a pained expression.

"You were lucky. You should've seen what she did to the last guy who tried to cop a feel. I'm not entirely sure he could still father a child after what she did to him."

The man's eyes widened markedly and he quickly moved away, all protest at his mistreatment gone.

Rafferty smiled and continued on after Lisa. He'd known Lisa ever since she had come from the academy. She had a nose for finding out the truth and had quickly risen to the top, but she had poor understanding of social graces and could be downright insensitive at times.

She was pretty level-headed most of the time, but sometimes something seemed to boil over inside of her and render her to such an uncontrolled state that he swore she went looking for a fight.

She'd been like this for over two weeks now and Rafferty felt worn thin from putting out her fires, or at least trying to. Goodness knew there wasn't anything he would be able to do if she went ballistic on someone.

Lisa Tauranto was singularly blessed in life. Born of an Italian mother and a East African Negro father, she had what every woman envied, both in form and flawless skin.

She didn't even wear makeup or do anything with her long black curly hair, an attribute from her Italian mother.

She was strong and could have easily had a career as a professional athlete. There may have been men stronger than her on the force, but they still probably didn't stand much of a chance against her. She had mastered at least half a dozen fighting styles and seemed to do nothing but work out in her time off.

She wasn't a workaholic by nature, but something drove her so hard that she could have passed for one. Whatever it was Rafferty hoped it would stop, because he could see that she was starting to wear thin emotionally. She'd even lost a little weight, he thought.

Rafferty was worried for her. He hoped something good would break out in her life soon to slow her down, because the way she was going through it, it didn't seem that enjoying life was even a concept she recognized.

Lisa was about to bust her way through the backstage door, when a tall weasel of a man stepped in front of her and Rafferty saw confrontation written all over the scene about to unfold.

The weasel spoke, "Is there something I can help you with honeylicious?" he asked, as he gave Lisa an openly appreciative look.

I wasn't in a good mood and the piece of walking human garbage in front of me was wearing out what little patience I had left.

"Step aside!" I gritted out.

"Whoa! Whoa! No way miss! I own this joint! To go backstage and view the lovely ladies is a paying venture only," he finished, salaciously.

My fist tightened at my side, but I flipped up my badge instead. He read it and his face creased into a lopsided smile. I wasn't entirely sure he wasn't high on something.

"Lisa Candace Tauranto, NYPD detective. Woo we! That sure is a mouthful, but without a warrant you're not getting past that door. But hey, I'll tell ya what I'll do. If you'd like to make some extra money with that hot bod of yours, I'd be willing to let you strut around my stages and peel off a few layers, if you know what I mean. Then, you'd get all the access to the dressing rooms and the girls that you want."

His look of confident egotism skipped a beat when I abruptly took him by the throat and slammed him back against the door, as my other fist drew back to smash his ugly stained teeth inward.

"Candace!" Rafferty's voice broke through into my consciousness.

My little watch dog always used my middle name when things got out of control, and things had certainly gotten out of control.

I let out a big sigh and relaxed my drawn back fist. The beady eyes of the weasel I held reflected the inherent cowardice that lay within his outwardly braggadocious demeanor. I brought both hands to his shirt at his throat and pulled him closer to my face.

"Step aside and stay out of my business, or so help me I'll arrest you for resisting an officer and make sure you get thrown into a private holding cell with a seven foot tall Russian thug, who'd rather peel the clothes off you than any girl you have in this place," I finished in a sibilant whisper, as I watched the full impact my words were having on him.

He nodded and stammered, as he tried to blurt something out.

Disgusted, I shoved him to the side and pushed my way through the door to the backstage area.

Scattered out in front of the mirrors, the girls were in various stages of undress. They came to an awareness of us quickly and turned to see what we wanted. Rafferty turned a little pink and shifted slightly to stare at the wall, as most of the dancers were topless.

I held up my badge and asked, "All right, I have a feeling you all know why I'm here, but if there's any doubt, I'll explain. The warehouse down by the east pier, what do you know about it and what happened there?"

Most of the girls nervously glanced among themselves and I knew that I had found my prey, so I went in for the kill.

"Failing to answer my question could land you all as accessories to a murder investigation."

They were all talking at the same time, which didn't help my headache any.

I held up a hand, "All right, one at a time! Starting with you," I finished, pointing at a topless brunette.

She blabbered out words at the speed of light. "We were offered a large sum of money if we showed up at the set and did the same thing we do here. That's all we did, I swear!"

The rest of the girls either nodded their heads vigorously or echoed her statement.

I held up a photo of Ahmed Sazzar.

"Have any of you seen this man?"

Down to the last one they shook their heads, no.

Puzzled I asked, "Exactly what did happen?"

The brunette looked around for support and then spoke. "We got into costume and got to our positions and started doing our thing. The place was just like this one. A bunch of men came in from another room and acted like the men do here, but they weren't for real, it was like they were acting or something. They brought in Philippe. He was unconscious and they sat him down at a table. I saw a man inject him with something. A little while later Philippe came awake and started enjoying himself, as usual, as he watched us."

"Wait! Wait! You knew the man they brought in unconscious?" I asked in surprise.

"Yeah sure, his name is Philippe Valo. He's a pretty regular customer of ours. He's gone for a couple of months at a time and then he's back almost every night, until he leaves again. The girls like him. He's not real mean like a lot of them can be when they've had a few, and he's always got money."

"All right, back to what happened," I said, directing her back on course.

"Well, nothing happened for a while, until this big serious dude came in. He gave me the heebie-geebs, in a good way, if you know what I mean," she added with a nervous laugh that gritted on my nerves. Most of the other girls had responded in kind to the mention of the 'serious dude'.

I sighed heavily; it was like dealing with a class of two year olds. Yelling wouldn't do any good.

"Then what happened?" I continued.

"Well, he went to Philippe's table and Philippe got a real serious expression on his face. I think he was scared. He and the man talked for probably over an hour and Philippe wrote something down on a paper and then the big man left."

"What happened to Philippe then?"

A blond from the end of the line spoke up, "I think they slipped him a Mickey in his drink, because he fell back asleep on the table."

"Then what?"

"They told us to go home and paid us what they said they would."

I held up the sketch, "Is this the man that talked to Philippe?"

The brunette smile widely, "It sure is! I..." I held up my hand to cut off any further lurid conversation.

"Have any of you seen this man since then?" I asked.

The same blond as before spoke up, "I overheard two of them say they were going to interrogate

another man in the next room when they were done with Philippe.”

I nodded, as I digested the information.

Two men? The plot was certainly thickening.

“Nobody heard this man’s name?” I asked, holding up the sketch of the man again and they all shook their heads, no.

“Thank you for your time and cooperation. I may need some of you to testify as to what you’ve told me so don’t any of you leave town, understand?”

On a chorus of nods we left the back stage area and headed back out into the noise and lights.

Once in the car I pressed my hand to my forehead and kept the pressure there for a moment.

“Headache?” Rafferty asked.

I nodded.

“Maybe you should take a sleeping pill or two. You need to get some rest,” he said in evident concern.

I smiled; my little watch dog was worried about me as usual. “I’ll be fine. Call our lover boy in and see if we have an address for him.”

He sighed, but complied with my request.

“Got it! He’s housed in a swanky apartment complex five blocks from here.”

I put the car in gear and we eased out into traffic.

Chapter Three

Deep Water

There was a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door and the sight of it just didn't sit well with me. I didn't match with what I already knew of Philippe Valo.

He was the consummate playboy, devil-may-care thief. He was implicated in a dozen or more antiquity thefts and even a few bank jobs. There had never been enough evidence though to pin an indictment on him.

He may be flashy, but he was smart too. He liked money and he was good at getting it, by all accounts. He led an easy-going life.

He was the kind of guy that would proposition a cleaning lady, who accidentally walked in on him having sex, into joining along in the act. Hanging a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door just wasn't his style.

I glanced at Rafferty and I saw he was thinking the same thing. We both drew our guns.

I was about to knock on the door, when I heard a muffled cry of pain from within the room.

Probable Cause.

That was all I needed. I shot the key pad lock, disarming it in the process as it returned to its default setting and then I side-kicked the door, busting it open and tearing the security chain off with it.

Rafferty ducked past me into the room, and I swung in after him. In a split second of realization, I took in the grisly scene of the room.

Three tall black men were gathered around the only bed in the room, where they were systematically cutting up Philippe just as they must have done to Ahmed.

The words 'Police! Freeze!' stuck fast in my throat as the savage eyed men turned towards the door, nothing but deadly intent in their eyes as they lobbed bloody knives at us.

I ducked to the side as a knife slammed into the wall where I had just been and took aim at one of the men that was pulling a pistol clear of his waistband. I shot him in the shoulder, but with a grimace of pain he kept bringing the gun up and I shot him three times in the chest, killing him.

The man beside him was running straight for me and I aimed for his leg and missed. He slapped my gun away so hard it felt like my trigger finger was almost broken off, as the gun flew from my grasp.

I ducked, as his fist plowed into the drywall where my head had been. I continued on around him and helped his forward movement by shoving him hard into the wall. Before I could secure him against it, he jack knifed backwards into me sending an elbow into my ribs that had me sucking for air and back pedaling away fast.

I ducked a wild swing at my head only to find that it had been a set up for his other fist, which struck me hard on the cheek bone. I fell off to the side onto my knees, as stars flashed briefly in my head.

I saw his leg coming at my head in a sideways knockout kick. My rigorous training took over in place of my sluggish brain. I caught the foot and twisted the leg sharply.

The man cried out at the sudden pain and, with the momentum of his kick at me and my twisting of his leg, he turned over and fell onto his front. I leaped onto him, driving my knees into his back and knocking him back to the floor as he tried to rise.

I quickly pinned his one arm with a knee, as I pulled his other arm up behind him, until I felt his shoulder about to pop. Rafferty dove onto his legs helping to further hold the man down with his

weight. Rafferty apparently had dealt with the other guy at some point in this scuffle.

I reached for the hand cuffs behind my back with one hand. "You're going to face a lot of tough questions pal! Not to mention a murder rap!" I said, breathing heavy.

He reared his head back and I was about to tweak his arm harder to further pacify him, when I heard him chomp down hard on his jaw. His body began to jerk and spasm beneath us and then he was still.

I felt for a pulse, but there was none. I glanced at his face, turned out to the side, and saw the foaminess of his mouth.

He had chomped down on a poison capsule under a false tooth!

Who did that anymore?

That kind of stuff went out with the Cold War decades ago, hadn't it? Who would kill themselves in order to avoid capture?

I heard a groan from the bed and I remembered the tortured man. I jumped up and went to the bed, noticing that the other man in the room was lying on the floor dead, with a hand near a fallen gun.

I looked down at Philippe's bloody body not knowing where to start and grimly knew that there wasn't anything that could be done anyway. He had but moments to live.

"Call an ambulance," I said to Rafferty anyway.

Philippe seemed to be coming in and out of consciousness and I quickly took off his gag. His eyes focused on me.

"Philippe, this is very important. Can you tell me what you've gotten mixed up in? Who sent these men to do this?"

His words, though weak, were clear enough, "I'm not telling you anything, nigger!"

His blatant racism wasn't anything new. I'd dealt with it in one form or another all my life from both sides, black and white.

I ignored the hatred in his eyes and said in an effort to get him to talk, "Well, if it makes any difference, I'm a half-breed, so maybe you could at least tell the half white side of me something?"

He shook his head resolutely and muttered out, "I should have listened to Flint. I shouldn't have stayed. I shouldn't have...."

He was fading fast. I leaned close and asked, "Who is Flint? Did he send these men?"

His eyes opened briefly in comprehension and he shook his head, no.

"Was he the man that met you at the warehouse?"

He nodded yes and then slumped dead on the bed, as he exhaled out his last breath. I leaned back up from the bed, as EMTs came rushing through the broken door. I moved away from the bed to stare out the window at the glittering lights of the city.

At least now I had a name. That was something, right?

I really wasn't sure anymore. I needed sleep. The hit to my head had only made my headache worse. I wasn't going to be able to function much longer at this rate.

A passing EMT saw my cheek and stopped to work on it. She pulled the split and bruised skin back together with some butterfly stitches and then gave me a reproving look.

"Those eyes of yours tell me you need to see a bed ASAP and I suggest you stay there for the next ten hours or so."

I nodded, got up, and headed for the door.

Rafferty held my gun out to me and I took it gratefully, just as I was grateful to have him here to back me up.

"I'm going home to bed." I said.

"Good, I'll drive you there," he said with eagerness.

"Okay," I said softly, being unusually passive.

Chapter Four

Long Night

I fumbled with the keys at the door of my apartment for a moment. Finally, I slipped the right key into the worn lock and the door opened.

I shut the door behind me with a swing of my foot. No one and nothing rushed up to greet me as I entered my little haven away from the watchful eyes of the world.

I'd never cared much for dogs. I did, however, get a cat three years back.

It hadn't liked me though and I had ended up giving it to a kid three doors down from me. At last report, they were very happy with each other.

After the cat, I had gotten some fish. I had not expected to enjoy them as much as I had. It had been so rewarding to see them clamor together at feeding time or just idly watch them swim around their tank.

That ambient pastime had ended one morning when I had found them all floating belly up. That was a bad morning. I'd even called off work sick, which was something I had almost never done.

Rafferty had even showed up at my apartment to see what was wrong. I'd been an emotional wreck and he had been the one to dispose of the fish.

It seemed stupid to be so emotionally involved over a few dead fish, but I had been. To Rafferty's credit he had seemed to understand and hadn't told anyone about the incident.

I'd been putting off getting more fish, but maybe it was time. Maybe this place would hold a little more meaning again and not be quite so lack-luster and lonely.

Weariness hit me in a wave. By the light of the city lights outside, I popped back some ibuprofen, probably more than I should have, and started taking off my clothes, dropping them on the floor on my way to the bed.

I didn't even bother to take off my bra or change into sleep wear; I just crashed into the bed, which I instantly regretted when my cheek hit the pillow hard. Turning my head so my good cheek was down, I reached down and yanked the covers up over me.

Sleep closed in fast, but before it did my hand closed over the golden cross of my necklace and I whispered a prayer for peace from the nightmares that had been haunting me again as of late.

I wasn't overly religious, but I knew there was a God. It had been a long time since I had gone to church or even prayed. Maybe I should do that this weekend, was my last thought.

I jerked upright in the bed, my scream still lingering in my ears. My hand went to my mouth and I started to sob.

I couldn't take it anymore!

Oh God, please help me!

I crashed back against my pillows and cried for a while, but sleep wouldn't come, no matter how much I needed it. I threw back the covers and got up.

I looked at the alarm clock in disgust, 2:00 am. I'd only been asleep for less than two hours.

My eyes burned and I stumbled my way to the bathroom. I didn't turn on the light as I turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on my face repeatedly. I stood there for a moment, water dripping off

my face onto the countertop.

I was so tired of this!

I headed back to the bed, dreading every step, but I had to get some sleep even at the risk of another nightmare. I was about to slip back under the covers when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

I wasn't alone!

It was a terrible realization to have and I reacted quickly out of fear, my hands dove under my pillow to grasp a small 9mm I kept there and I swung around with it held high.

My aim centered on the shadowy outline of a person sitting in one of my small kitchenette chairs.

The filtered city light from outside outlined the individual and I made it out to be a man wearing a dark suit. Something chilled within me as I guessed as to whom it could be, the man from the sketch!

I was breathing hard, as if I had just been in a race, and I felt the tight grip I had on the gun waver slightly.

'Get a hold of yourself Lisa!' My brain screamed at me, but I couldn't help it.

Fear gripped me hard, as I stared down the barrel of the pistol at the man sitting in my kitchen chair.

"How long have you been sitting there?" I asked, as my mind seized in consideration of everything that he could have done to me and perhaps still could. My grip tightened on the gun yet further at the possibility of that last thought.

He spoke, "I'm sorry I didn't wake you from the nightmare you were having, but I figured that living alone and being woken up by a stranger would be a nightmare all of its own."

"Who are you and what are you doing in my apartment?" Before he could answer I added, "Are you here to kill me?"

There was a short moment of silence. "If I was here to kill you, you would already be dead. As to who I am, you may call me Flint. As to why I'm here, the best way to say it, is that I've come to warn you."

He stood up and my finger tightened on the trigger.

"That gun isn't loaded," he said softly.

He took a step toward me and I pulled the trigger.

Click! Click! Click!

He'd unloaded my gun and slipped it back under my pillow while I slept!

A little cry of despair escaped me. I turned and felt under my side of the mattress for the sawed off shotgun I kept there.

It was gone!

I turned to the night table for my phone, but it was gone too!

I glanced at the slowly approaching man and saw him hold up my phone before he slipped it back into a coat pocket. There was nothing else to do; I had to take him out if I was to survive.

I threw the gun at him and then launched myself toward him. Sickeningly, I saw him snatch the gun out of the air and idly toss it to the side. I launched at him feet first in a double legged kick, but he caught my feet and stole my momentum.

My head and upper back should've crashed into the floor hard, with my feet being held captive, but I felt him grab my shoulder and pull my torso upwards as he let my feet drop. Then he spun me around, moments before we both crashed into the floor; but he didn't let his weight fall on me like he could have.

Just before we impacted with the floor I felt his hand slide in front of my face, which helped absorb the force of the connection of my head with the floor.

As I gathered in a quick breath, I realized in anguish that it was already all over before I could even move. My legs were twisted one way and my arms another so that I literally couldn't move at all. He could dislocate my shoulders, pop my hip out, break my back, crush my windpipe; he could do anything he wanted to me!

There was no overcoming either the strength or skill with which he held me and I couldn't help the little wail of despair that escaped through my parted lips.

I was afraid.

I hadn't been this powerless or helpless over my own fate since I was a little girl and had been forced to watch my fathers' brother rape and kill my own mother and then rape me.

I had never wanted this to happen again!

I had worked so hard to learn how to defend myself, but it was all useless to me now!

I started to cry softly, as I let my forehead down to rest against the floor. His voice against my ear stilled my breathing.

"Fear is a terrible thing, but it can teach a useful lesson. I know what the fear you are experiencing right now feels like. I've felt it before, too. You're completely helpless, and you can't stop anything at all that I might attempt, from happening to you. I don't enjoy giving you this fear. It's not why I came here, but it serves a point. Two men have died so far and more are sure to follow and I don't want you to be one of them. You're a good person and a good cop, a rare combination these days. Those two men died feeling just what you're feeling right now. Don't be the next victim to experience fear like this. Close your investigation and walk away or this could be you in the near future!"

His words ended and he let me go and got up. Shakily I sat up rubbing the soreness from my arms, acutely aware of my near naked status. I was cold and the tracks left by my tears across my skin were freezing.

Where had he gone?

I felt a blanket drape around my shoulders and I latched onto it reflexively. His big hands slid under my shoulders as he pulled me up to my feet and moved me backward to sit me down on the edge of the bed.

He stood in front of me and I couldn't bring myself to look up into his eyes, not that much could be seen in the darkened room. But I knew what he looked like from the sketch, which hadn't lied about a thing.

I saw my phone light up, as he placed it back on its charging station beside my bed.

"Your shotgun and bullet clips are on the kitchen table. You need better locks and you should have a chair under the door handle as an extra precaution."

He stood there for a moment longer and then I heard him sigh loudly. "You're not going to give up your investigation, are you Lisa?"

I shook my head no and he sighed again. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

I watched him go into the bathroom and I heard water run briefly and then he was back. He pushed me back onto the pillows and swung my legs into the bed and then covered me up with the sheet and coverlet. He placed a cold washcloth on my head.

"Try to get some sleep; heaven knows you're going to need it. If you need to get a hold of me you can reach me at this number."

He placed a white card on top of my phone. "It's in use for one call only. So make it good!"

He turned and walked to the door and pointed to the handle. "Chair, tomorrow night."

Then the door was closing.

My eyes drifted from the closed door to the ceiling above my head. What had just happened?

I couldn't think about it right now. I was just too tired. The aftermath of all the adrenaline that had been going through me made me drowsier than I had been all day.

Chapter Five

Locksmith

Bright sun was poring through the half open blinds, and I starred at the sunny beams dreamily for a moment, before abruptly jerking upright in the bed.

How late had I slept?

I glanced at the clock. It was after eleven!

The captain is going to kill me! I reached for my phone, which is when I saw the plain white card with a single phone number laying on top of it.

So it hadn't all been a dream. My strange encounter with a murder suspect had really happened last night.

He wasn't the murderer, I knew that, but he was involved in some way. I needed to find out how.

The sun showed more writing on the card and I turned it over and read in a bold cursive script, *'PS, if you need a safe place to run to for shelter, go to this address. The door locks automatically so don't freak out when it does. Again, a onetime only use.'* The address was listed below.

I got up feeling very much like a new person, although my cheek was sore, as well as my rib cage, where I'd taken an elbow.

I went to the bathroom and lit a match to burn the card, having already memorized its contents.

He'd said I was a good cop. I wasn't so sure, seeing as how I was currently destroying evidence. I watched the cursive writing on the back burn to ash in the sink. Then it hit me.

He hadn't mentioned anything about a safe house last night, just a phone number. Which meant what?

I walked past my bed to the open living room beyond. The pillow at the one end of my couch had a dent in it!

He'd come back!

Why?

One of my kitchen chairs was missing and I glanced over at the door to see it sitting beside it ready for use. He hadn't wanted me to be here alone without the chair in place!

My stomach rumbled, reminding me of how long it had been since I had really eaten something. I went to my small kitchen. The first thing I noticed were the dirty dishes in my sink. He had eaten breakfast in my apartment!

I opened the refrigerator. There was a glass of orange juice, already poured, sitting on the top rack with a sticky note on it that had an arrow pointing toward the stove. I picked up the glass and cautiously opened the oven door.

A small oven dish sat there. I pulled it out. It looked like he'd made some kind of a breakfast egg quiche. It was still warm.

I stood there looking at the baking dish in my hand in a state of profound shock. Why? He'd come to warn me, and I think he was entirely on the level when he had done that, but why all of this?

The answer was there even though I didn't want to acknowledge it. He must like me was the simplest answer.

I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of relationship, if I'd ever be ready, and beyond that he was a suspect in a murder investigation. Not exactly boyfriend material.

Even if he wasn't the murderer, he was waist deep in something highly illegal. And yet why, even

after considering all the facts against the man, had I known yesterday when I saw the sketch that this man was going to profoundly change my life.

I glanced at the clock. It was going on twelve. I had to get out of here! I sat down and ate, then got ready for the day in a hurry.

As I stepped up to the door I saw that cooking breakfast wasn't the only thing he had done. He had switched out my door lock and replaced the deadbolt with a new one!

A key for each sat on the chair by the door, which meant that he had the duplicate keys. Somehow that didn't bother me as much as it should have.

I picked the keys up and stepped outside and locked the door. I let my head fall forward against the door. I had burned a sample of his writing and he had no doubt left finger prints all over my apartment, but was I calling anyone to report it? No.

How could I explain why he'd spent the night in my room anyway? It was too embarrassing to ever contemplate. He had been wrong. I was a terrible cop, at least where he was concerned.

Old Mrs. Thachet came out of her apartment two doors down. When she saw me her face lit up and she gave me two thumbs up. My face completely flushed; she must have seen him!

I tried to hurry past, but she reached out and snagged my arm. What must she be thinking?

"So nice to see you settling down dear, but remember," she tapped her wedding ring, "This first and then....." She patted my stomach with a knowing nod, as her voice trailed off.

My face felt like it was about to become molten lava. I managed to smile wanly, and I pulled my arm free as I stepped away sideways toward the stairs.

Oh, this was bad!

Mrs. Thachet was the worst gossip in the whole building, bless her heart. It would be common knowledge by tonight that I had a man. I groaned inwardly.

Chapter Six

Strung Up

Of course, the first person I had to run into when I entered the office was the Captain. Immediately started to stumble over myself, in my hurry to apologize for sleeping in late, but he held up a hand.

“I’m just glad to see you rested, no apology needed. You’ll want to check in with Sal and Rafferty. They found out something interesting about our mystery man, Flint.” He patted me on the back and continued on down the hall.

I watched him go, all the while choking on what needed to be said, but I just couldn’t tell him. Somehow the words just didn’t come out. How could they? He’d think I was joking!

Rafferty and Sal looked up at my approach and, to my surprise, neither mentioned my tardiness, for which I was very grateful. “So, what did you find out about our mystery man?” I asked, feeling like the worst possible sort of hypocrite and traitor.

Sal swiveled around in his chair, “Well, not so much about the actual man. We’ve only been able to pull a few vague references to a man that goes by the name of Flint. The name popped up in France in a big international scandal a couple of years back. The Chinese have a three million dollar bounty if captured alive and only a million if he’s dead. Apparently, somebody really wants to have the joy of killing him all to themselves. Besides that juicy tidbit, that’s all we can find out about him.”

Rafferty looked pleased as he stated with authority, “But I thought the name sounded familiar to me so I started trying to remember where I had heard it before. It is not a common name after all. Only seven are listed in the entire country; four of those are dead and the other three are in nursing homes. I kept thinking about it and then it clicked, Louis L’Amour!”

I stared blankly at Rafferty and mimicked his outspread hand motion after a moment. “What?”

“You don’t know him? Oh, come on you two!” Rafferty exclaimed throwing his hands up in the air.

“Should I?” I asked.

“You bet you should! He’s only the greatest western writer that ever lived!” Rafferty exclaimed explosively.

I smiled, “Well that explains why I’ve never heard of him. I’m not currently up on my western fiction reading for the month, you might say.”

Rafferty crossed his arms, looking offended.

Sal broke in, “Well anyway, this author wrote a lot of books. A lot of books.” He dryly underscored his last sentence by pointing at the multiple cardboard boxes on the table.

I picked a book up out of a box.

“There must be nearly a hundred books here! These are all yours Rafferty?”

“Eighty six to be exact, and yes they are!” he finished testily, apparently still wounded over my rejection of his favorite genre and author.

“What do any of these books have to do with our case?”

Sal picked up a book and I read the cover title, “Flint!”

“Got us to thinking about our mystery man a little more. He seems to be something of an international fix-it man. While a lot of what we know doesn’t appear to be illegal, depending on your perspective, some of it most definitely appears to be. Stranger than that, he seems to have no connection with any governing body here or elsewhere in the world, but rather seems to act independently. Which got us to thinking, maybe he’s not alone. We took all of the main character names from the books by this author, both male and female, and this is what we got,” Sal said in

excitement.

Sal slid his chair to the side so I could see his computer screen. It was a rough summary of thirty seven names. "As far as we can tell, characters started popping up in the international scene in the mid 1970's and have continued on to the present. Some of the names don't have any recent activity, while others appear to still be active."

I nodded, "Somebody was a fan. You think this is some kind of international firm specializing in problem fixing?"

They both nodded.

"Good work you two, now what about our three killers?"

They both grimaced and Rafferty said, "Nothing on them. They entered the country two days ago with forged passports from France, but they had paperwork on them which favor an origin of West Africa. That's all we got. We were able to dig up a good bit on Philippe though. Five years ago he acted as a guide for an archaeological expedition into the Congo area of West Africa. Something happened and only two managed to escape the expedition alive. One was Philippe Valo and the other, as you might have expected, was Ahmed Sazzar. Philippe seems to have disappeared for a while and Ahmed packed up his antiquities shop, moved to New York and starting working for the museum."

"A thief as a guide and an antiquities dealer along on an archeological expedition?" I scoffed.

"I know, it sounds more like a tomb raiding posse doesn't it?" Rafferty added.

The lights in the building abruptly went out and Sal cursed loudly, "Why do they always time these black outs to hit in the hottest part of the day!"

There was enough light coming through the windows to be able to see, but there was little to be done that didn't require the internet for research. The generator backup should have kicked on by now, but it wasn't a surprise that it hadn't. The generators were rarely in working order.

I'd been going to question the homeless man further, but the cell bays would be completely dark and sweltering in a little while. I'd do that later.

I picked up the book Sal had been holding and asked Rafferty, "Mind if I borrow this and do a little research?"

"Sure, knock yourself out." he responded, looking secretly pleased that I was reading one of his coveted westerns.

I smiled and made my way outside.

The blackout was a long one, lasting just over three hours. The book was a quick read and I stayed outside a few extra minutes to finish it up.

Westerns weren't my thing, but I had to admit this was a well written book. I wondered if these fix-it agents got to pick their characters because I could see several similarities between the character in the book and my nighttime visitor. Both had hidden qualities and both were tough as nails, to put it in the western vernacular.

I had just entered the precinct building, when the alarms went off and the doors slammed shut behind me. My phone rang and I saw it was Sal.

"What's going on?" I asked in a rush.

"You need to come to the cell block!"

I hung up the phone and ran for the stairs since the elevators were still fouled up because of the blackout.

I pushed through the gathered ranks of police in the cell bay, stopping only briefly when I saw the swinging body of the homeless man. I finished pushing my way into the cell.

Lauren, the medical examiner, looked over at me, "No, I don't think it was a suicide. I don't think our victim was fit enough or tall enough to climb up the bars, lean over and catch the light fixture on the wall to hang himself from it. The cell block officer says he didn't have any rope on him either.

His belt is missing, but the officer that checked him in swears that it was a leather belt and not made of rope. The worst part of it is, I think he was alive and choking to death for as much as an hour's time. He managed to get one of his hands partially between the rope and his throat. He left scuff marks all over the wall behind him with the heels of his shoes. I found this clutched tight in his free hand."

She held the worn stub of a white crayon out to me.

I starred at the crayon for a moment and then said, "Turn out the lights."

People looked at me a little puzzled, but a patrol cop hit the switch. I turned my phone flashlight app on.

"Anybody got anything fine and dark, like pencil lead?" I asked.

"How about fingerprint dusting powder?"

"That should work," I said.

A flashlight lit up and a detective from narcotics moved away. He was back three minutes later with a bag full of the stuff.

I scooped my hands into it and threw it lightly against the wall to the left of the hanging figure. The powder puffed off the wall to fall to the floor, but some of the finer dust stuck to the marks of the white crayon on the wall.

There was a general rise of exclamation from the gathered crowd at what was revealed on the wall beside the dead man's hand.

A man's face was roughly captured in a profile shot, as if the man had been looking away; the image included the tops of the man's shoulders and the open front of his shirt. The real attention had been given to a detailed tattoo.

The twisting body of a snake slinked across the exposed area of chest only to disappear up and around the far side of the neck. The body of the snake reappeared, coming around the back of the neck to culminate at a head-on shot of the snake's head, facing us on the man's cheek. Its mouth was open, revealing its fangs and forked tongue. The eyes were malevolent like only a snake's can be.

One officer asked in a hushed tone, "How could he draw that not even being able to see what he was doing?"

Lauren answered him, "He was an artist, and they often have the ability from long practice to draw what they see in their mind without ever looking, so in tune are their hands with their mind's image. The good ones are anyway," she added.

The narcotic detective that had gotten the fingerprint dust spoke up, "I've seen enough of gang tattoos to know this one looks symbolic somehow. Anybody know what kind of snake that is?"

"It's a black mamba and the tattoo is the sign of an obscure cult in East Africa," I answered softly, even as the image on the wall ushered back in a whole host of bad memories that I had been running from for years.

My nightmares were becoming a reality again. I turned away from the scene feeling sick to my stomach.

Chapter Seven

Bare

I sat staring at my monitor not really seeing anything on it. Rafferty came up and placed a book in front of me. I looked down and I saw it was the sketch pad that I had let the homeless man keep.

I opened it and it was like staring right back at myself. I kept turning the pages. All of them were of me.

The man had so much talent. What had led him to the life of a homeless addict? So many homeless people had great abilities like this. What made them choose the life of the streets?

"The next two are quite interesting and, if you're wondering, I'm the only one who's seen that book."

I looked up at Rafferty puzzled, and then back down, as I turned the page. I gasped at what the next sheet of the sketch book revealed.

It depicted me walking along what looked like the deck of a yacht with only a bikini on. While the amount of exposure was, in and of itself alarming, it was who was walking beside me that had my breath escaping.

It was Flint!

In direct contrast to my nearly bare attire, he was dressed in a pair of crisp slacks and what looked like a silk shirt. The end of an automatic pistol stuck up from the waistband of his pants and his right hand went around my back to rest on my right hip in a very familiar and possessive gesture.

Everything about the picture was absolutely crazy!

Perhaps craziest of all was the contented smile on my face. It looked like I was really enjoying myself.

"Why would he draw something like that?" Rafferty asked, eyeing me closely.

"I have no idea!" I said, louder than I should have, which prompted a few looks by others nearby.

I quickly closed the book so nobody could see the picture. Rafferty gave me a comical, not-so-serious eye over before saying, "Not only was our artist friend gifted with a photographic memory, but he must have had x-ray vision to capture you so well."

The picture had captured me rather well, but how would he know that? Then I remembered a sting operation two years earlier involving a group of high priced escorts that were systematically being knocked off.

I had gone undercover as an escort. That had been an embarrassing investigation, but I had caught the killer. Rafferty wasn't done though.

"I wonder if he couldn't see the future, too?" he said in a leading tone.

What did he mean by that?

Reluctantly, I reopened the sketch book to the last page with a drawing. I stared at the picture in shock. It depicted both me and Flint locked together in an extremely intimate and passionate looking kiss.

I slammed the book closed and kept my head down.

"Out with it, Lisa. I know you've been holding out on me," Rafferty said knowingly.

I looked up, my face flushed with embarrassment, "He was at my apartment last night. He stayed all night," I said quickly, before looking back down.

"And what happened?" Rafferty asked softly.

"He came to warn me to drop the investigation, said it would only get me killed and that he didn't

want that.”

“What else happened?”

I worked hard on the splintering corner of my desk, as I answered. “He watched me sleep, changed the locks on my door and left breakfast in the oven for me. That was all that happened! Nothing else happened, I swear!”

“That’s a lot, Lisa!”

My head sunk lower in mortification.

As if to himself Rafferty said, “He changed the locks on your door, made you breakfast and you slept through all that? You must trust him.”

I didn’t answer him directly, “I think him warning me was genuine and not just some ploy to get me out of his hair.”

“Kind of odd behavior though, you have to admit Lisa. Perhaps you two are meant to be together.”

I started to object, but stopped as I felt the need to look at the intimate sketch of me kissing Flint again. Were we meant to be together?

My hand started to open the book back up, but Rafferty’s hand slammed the cover back down, practically on top of my fingers, which is when I saw Sal approaching.

I quickly shoved the sketch book into a drawer and locked it. I’d never live it down if Sal saw those pictures. I came out of my embarrassment, as I caught sight of Sal’s troubled face.

He came up to us. “They found our snake guy. Dead, shot through the back of the head.”

I stood up abruptly, “Where?”

“Right beside the precinct in the alley.”

I thought instantly of Flint, but this didn’t seem like something he would do. Or was I just protecting him?

I pushed through the crowd of officers for the second time that day and ducked under the yellow tape. I felt bile rise up in my throat as I looked down upon the man and the snake emblem tattoo that stared up at me.

“You all right Lisa?” Lauren asked and I quickly let a mask fall over my face and nodded.

“Definitely our man. He still has our victim’s belt.” Lauren said, as she pulled out a leather belt from a pocket.

“The gun shot is clean. Looks like it was a professional hit. Our shooter knew what he was doing and from the angle of entry I’d say our shooter was on the upper tier of that parking garage down the street.”

I nodded and left the scene. I’d seen more than enough. It would seem possible that there was a fourth party involved in the operation now, or maybe there were still just three and Flint was the killer.

Rafferty hurried after Lisa. He was concerned for her. It wasn’t like her to show up to a crime scene and not even ask a question. Something about the dead man bothered her on a deep level; in particular he thought it had something to do with the snake tattoo, and not so much the man, because she had reacted the same way at the cell crime scene. And then he had showed that sketch book to her.

He didn’t know what that old hobo had been smoking to depict her and Flint together, especially the content that filled the back part of the sketch book. He’d thought it was a crazy joke, until he’d seen her reaction.

She’d spent last night with the suspect!

The case was getting more complex by the minute, as was Lisa’s private life.

Rafferty’s eyes flickered upward and widened, as he saw the small red dot appear on Lisa’s back.

He didn't hesitate, but rushed forward and shoved her as hard as he could. Moments later he felt the bullets that were meant for her, tear savagely through him.

More than thirty cops reacted swiftly, as they located the open window and the shooter, who was readjusting his aim, still intent on taking Lisa out.

Small arms fire peppered the wall and shattered glass all over the shooter. One bullet found its mark and smacked into him.

He fell forward, slumping over the window sill, as his rifle plummeted four stories to harmlessly crash into the sidewalk below.

I pressed my hand over the wound to help staunch the bleeding. "Oh Rafferty, why did you do that? You have a wife and two kids!"

Rafferty coughed, but spoke up discernibly, even though it sounded like it hurt. "Yes I do, and they're the best thing God ever gave me in this life, by far! You haven't gotten to experience what it's like to have a mate's undying love for you or the instant love that you feel for your child the first time you hold them and every time after that!"

His bloody hand reached up and grasped the front of my shirt, pulling me closer as my tears fell onto his chest.

"You're going to experience what I have been so blessed with in my life. Tell my wife I love her and my kids, tell them..."

"Stop talking like this Rafferty! You're going to be fine! The ambulance is almost here. I can hear it."

He pulled me closer, "Stop lying to me, Lisa. That dark blood all over your hands tells me one thing and that's that my liver is all blown away. I don't have long and you know it."

His body tightened in a spasm and my heart bled for him.

He opened his eyes, "Get a life, get your butt into a church and get right with God ..." His lips twisted up in a slight grin, "Enjoy your life with your locksmith friend, too!"

His eyes closed and he was gone, even as the slight grin remained. My face quivered with emotion I longed to express, but this wasn't the time or the place.

I stood up and wiped the tears from my face with my hand, getting blood on my face in the process. I turned from the still body on the ground and headed for the building where the dead sniper was.

I stepped into the room, followed by an ashen faced Sal.

"What do you have so far?" I asked, a little harshly.

Two detectives glanced at each other and then shrugged.

One spoke up, "Male, in his thirties, of middle eastern decent. No identifying paper work on him. The rifle's military grade. We're running his prints to see if he's on anybody's list. I can tell you though, he's most likely a terrorist instead of a paid hit man hired to bump you off."

"How's that?" I asked.

He pointed to a chair and I saw a vest draped across the back of it. It was a bomb vest complete with hand held detonator.

"Thank God he got plugged before he had a chance to use that thing!" the other detective said, while shaking his head.

"Thank you detectives. Let me know what you find out about him," I said courteously, before I left the room.

Reaching the street again I turned to Sal. I could see that he was taking his partner's death very hard. "Sal, I have to go on a trip to see someone concerning this case."

He shrugged and said, "When do we go?"

"We don't. I need you to stay here and man the fort. If anybody asks where I am, tell them I'm tracking down a lead in the case. If I drive through the night I should be able to be back here by tomorrow afternoon."

Sal looked like he wanted to object, but he could see my mind was made up. "At least tell me where you're going?" he asked pleadingly.

I looked away from him for a moment before looking back and he seemed a little shaken up by the hell he must be seeing in my eyes. "I'm going to see my father."

I pulled a scrap of paper out of my pocket and then the pen out of Sal's shirt pocket. I wrote down my father's address and handed the paper to Sal.

"If I'm not back in 48 hours, send the cavalry in to get my body."

He looked from me to the paper and then back again, "You're serious aren't you?"

"Deadly serious Sal. It's why I have to go alone."

Sal shook his head, "I don't understand?"

"I know you don't and I'm sorry I can't explain better right now, but this has to be done or I wouldn't be doing it, of that I can assure you!"

"What does your father have to do with this case?" Sal exhaled in frustration.

I looked away. "It's complicated. He may have nothing to do with it or he may have everything to do with it. I have to go. Don't tell anyone about my father."

I started walking away, but Sal interrupted, "Where on the island? The note doesn't say."

"That's because he owns the whole island," I said over my shoulder, as I headed back to my apartment.

Chapter Eight

Homecoming

I slammed the door shut and locked it. My eyes caught my bed in the open room apartment, but I denied myself the comfort of going to it so I could fall apart and mourn my friend.

I had never fully appreciated how integral Rafferty had become to me in my life and, now that he was gone, there was such a gaping hole left behind. I pushed away a tear, strode over to my closet and ripped the doors open roughly.

I yanked out clothes and threw them on the floor, as I leafed through them. None of what I wore day to day was going to fit the picture of how I must appear to my father.

I was coming to the end of the line when I hesitated on a sundress. It had been an impulse buy two years ago. I had actually been planning to take a vacation and rent a beach house, but a double homicide involving celebrities had intervened and I hadn't gone. I'd forgotten I still had the dress.

Its bright color and summer charm was the last thing I wanted to put on right now, but it was just right for what I needed. I stripped down and slipped it on over my undergarments. Then realized I needed a different kind of bra for this dress. I switched it and checked my hair in the mirror; it was one of my saving graces. I never had to do a thing to it.

I was lucky, given the struggles so many women of my color had to go through with their hair. I could thank my mother's Italian blood for that luxury.

I put makeup on, which I rarely, if ever, did. It wasn't that I didn't like it; it was just that it didn't really fit in with the world I worked in. There, I was ready. Oh, I wished I was ready!

I knew I looked good, but the way I felt inside reminded me of the scared young girl I had once been, when I had left the island the first time. One last thing to do. I went to the kitchen and pulled the stove out from the wall. I reached behind it and pulled out a key that had been placed on a magnet there.

I held the key in the palm of my hand, hating it and yet grateful for it right now. It was time to go.

I looked around my humble little home. This might be the last time I saw this place, but I felt no remorse in that, as it had never really felt like a home anyway, just a place to stay.

I closed the door and locked it behind me. I walked out onto the street and several men's heads turned. I hailed a taxi and three tried to stop, almost causing an accident.

I told the driver where I wanted to go, while letting him get his look at me without rebuffing him.

It took a while to get there, but when we did the cabby asked with concern, "You sure you don't want me to wait for you miss?" he asked, as he leaned down to see me through the open passenger window.

I smiled, "No, but thank you."

I watched him leave and then I glanced around; nobody else appeared to be about. I turned to the battered garage door of an even more battered looking warehouse.

After I unlocked the door with the key from the stove, I slid it up all the way. Everything was just where I had left it.

Two years ago my father had found me and he had tried to buy my affection as he did with all his many children, but I hadn't wanted any of it and this was only the second time I had seen the stuff.

Boxes full of dresses worth thousands of dollars each and never worn, jewelry and hand bags and pretty much all a girl could ask for was crammed into the space. I really should just drop the stuff off

at a Goodwill or something so somebody could get some use out of it.

There was probably a quarter of a million dollars worth of merchandise sitting in this old garage. About a quarter of a million was what the car probably cost too. That was what I had come for.

Not much was going to make me feel better right now, but speed might. I just hoped it would start. The keys lay on the expensive leather upholstery.

The interior lights of the car's rich interior lit up with the opening of the door. That was a good sign. Hopefully there would still be enough battery left to start it, assuming the mice hadn't chewed the starter wires off or the gas hadn't gone bad.

I turned the key and without hesitation the convertible came alive with a husky purr. The car was brand new and had only five miles on it.

I allowed myself to experience a little anticipation of the open road ahead, as I slipped it into gear and eased out on the clutch. I pulled it out of the garage and almost left the garage door open, thinking it would be best to just leave it and give some lucky street person a break; let them find the stash and benefit from it.

I stopped the car and got out to close the garage door and relock it. If I let the street people or hoodlums in this area have the stuff, all I would be doing is feeding their drug habits and other addictions. I didn't need that on my conscience too.

I pulled away from the run down area and, thankfully, traffic seemed to open up for me. I was soon driving free, out on the open road, as the sun started to dip below the horizon.

In that moment it would have been nice to just keep driving and leave everything behind. Start over somewhere else.

It was an overpowering feeling, but I stifled it. Rafferty deserved everything I could do to see that whoever had ordered the hit was brought to justice.

It was a long way to North Carolina and I didn't have a lot of time, so I let the speedometer needle rise, hoping the patrol cops were off somewhere, eating a donut.

The man at the ferry looked at me and then shrugged, "I hope you know what you're doing, lady. That island ain't the friendliest by all accounts, but you've paid me more than enough to take you there."

"Thank you," I said getting out of my car.

I walked to the railing of the small ferry and stared out at the waters of the sound ahead and the offshore islands that dotted the outer coastline of the Outer Banks.

It took a little over an hour to get to the little ferry dock on the island. There were no buildings, just the dock.

The ferry man opened up the gate and I walked up to him.

"Will you wait for me?" I asked.

The ferry man looked uncomfortable, like he was about to say no.

I reached out and touched his arm lightly, "Please!" I begged softly.

He looked down and then back up, as if he was weighing me in the balance.

Then, finally, he spoke, "You look like a nice girl. I can't imagine why you would want to come here!"

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, so I told him the truth.

"A friend of mine was killed. I think I may be able to find out from someone on this island who it was that killed my friend."

"Lady, the people that killed your friend could be on this island!"

"I know. I won't ask you to wait long, just a few hours, please?"

He sighed and slapped his pant leg hard, disgustedly. "All right, I'll wait for you for two hours

only; but not here. I'll wait offshore and, if I see you drive up alone, I'll come back."

It wasn't like me, but I reached out and hugged the old man.

The man patted me awkwardly on the back in return and said, "Take care of yourself, honey!"

The road twisted and meandered around the island's topography. There were no houses or signs of habitation other than the black asphalt road I traveled on. After five minutes of driving, I rounded a sandy knoll and there it was on the steepest part of the island, my father's version of the white house, only this mansion was probably larger.

It had to be to house my father's many children. Not to mention grandchildren and probably a few greats by now. My father was one of those super rich tycoons that nobody knew about. A Bill Gates without the recognition, which is how he liked it.

I couldn't vouch for how honestly gained Bill Gates fortune might be, but almost to a penny I would say my father's wealth was the product of thievery, extortion, blackmail, drug running, human trafficking, swindling, and the list went on. What I wanted to know was, had my father added international terrorism to the list of sins for which he was responsible?

Everything within me wanted to stop the car and turn around from this place from which I had escaped, but I kept driving, my hands white knuckled on the wheel.

I wished I had a gun, but having one was more likely to get me killed in this place than not having one. There was the problem of what I would do with a gun, too. I'd probably put a bullet in my father's brain without a moment's hesitation.

They'd kill me, but I would die doing the world a favor.

I pulled up at the gatehouse with its massive wrought iron gates. Men, my half brothers, armed with submachine guns stepped out from the gatehouse and spread out around the car. My father had a lot of enemies and rarely, if ever, left his island fortress anymore.

I rolled down a window at the approach of one of the men. He stared at me for a second and I saw the moment when he recognized me.

"Lisa?" he said, with evident surprise.

"Hello, Marshawn. Can I go through?"

He ignored my question, "Why would you come back here? Don't tell me you've come to do us all a favor and kill the old he-bull."

I met his gaze without blinking as I responded, "I wasn't intending to, but if I have to, it could become a possibility."

His face broke into a big grin. "Welcome back, sister."

He straightened up and waived his arm. They opened the gate as he walked around the front hood of the car and opened the passenger side door to slide in beside me. The submachine was casually pointed at my side.

"What's the matter Marshawn, don't you trust me?"

He laughed. "I don't trust any of my siblings, but for you I will make an exception."

He angled the gun barrel away from my side by a couple of inches.

"How trusting of you, dear brother. Where is our patriarch of this sordid tribe of sinners?"

Marshawn just grinned, "South lawn."

I pulled the car up under the massive portico and got out. I disregarded the stares of playing children and adults alike and walked through the lavishly landscaped surrounds of the massive palace on the hillside.

A tall form of a man stepped into my path and I halted. It was Rocco.

I hated him perhaps most, second only to my father.

"Well, if it isn't the detective come home for a family visit, or have you come for some other reason? Now I wonder?"

I fought to keep my eyes from straying to the snake's head tattoo on his cheek, but it was hard not to, which was its purpose.

He had approached as he was talking and I didn't see the knife in his hand until he was dragging the point of it up my dress only to pause over my left nipple through the dress. He pressed on the knife and it hurt.

It only helped to jog my memory as to what the sheer horror of growing up in this place had been like.

"I see you haven't changed any for the better over the years, Rocco. Now go play with your little toy somewhere else and get out of my way!" I said savagely.

He smiled and pressed a little harder on the knife, but I didn't move. He removed the knife with a show of fake gallantry and stepped to the side of the path, giving me a half bow.

I stepped past him, half expecting to have my throat slit or the knife rammed into my back, twisted and then broken off. But the strike didn't come and I continued on down the path.

My nipple hurt!

I glanced down without appearing to do so and was glad for the orange and red material of the dress I had worn. It helped to hide the little spot of blood that had seeped through my bra. If that was the only injury I came away from this place with, I would be extremely lucky.

Everything was a power play on this island realm of my father's. You were either vicious wolf or hapless victim. There was no middle ground.

All that was respected was strength. It was a terrible way to have to live and yet I had managed, until I had turned sixteen.

One night, when things had looked especially bad for me, I had stolen what cash I could find and swam the several miles distance across the sound, in the dark of night, to the mainland.

Nearing the beach, I had been caught in an undertow current which I had barely survived. I managed to get out and had been surviving life's strong currents ever since.

I saw him then, sitting under the canopy of an umbrella, on a small patio out in the middle of the lawn that lay behind the house, with the beach below. I walked through the perfectly manicured grass toward him.

My father, Iya Muatombo, had been born in a grass thatched hut made of mud, in Ethiopia. You could say that he had removed himself as far as he could from the humbleness of his beginnings.

His back was to me and when I was still twenty or so feet away he stood, the massive muscles of his shoulders and arms bunching the material of the perfectly tailored suit.

How he heard my approach over the crashing of the waves below and the landward breeze, I could not fathom. He had the senses of a cat and the instincts of one, too.

My father was a brutal monster, but that was objectifying him somewhat. He was also cunning. He had not risen so far on sheer strength alone.

Never before had I seen that raw magnetism of strength combined with extreme intellect in a single person, until just the other day. Flint was such a man. I hoped he wasn't a monster, too.

My father turned to me with that familiar, not sure what to make of it, half smile and revealed a mouth of pearly white teeth. His skin was as black as coal and he still shaved his head bare.

His conditioning hadn't slumped a bit and he still stood at an even seven feet in height. The only way I could tell that he had aged at all was that his eyebrows were a little more grey.

He was seventy five years old and could have passed for a man of forty five. What kept him so young, I didn't know, but it couldn't be clean living that was for sure.

His deep voice broke the wall of silent study that was between us. "So, the prodigal daughter has returned. Is your unexpected appearance indicative of any intention on your part to kill me?"

"I could ask the same of you, father?" I replied evenly, standing still in the grass, waiting to see what would become of me.

He smiled a little broader and indicated the chair across the table from him. I moved to it and sat down. He did not follow suit, but instead followed me. I started to rise, but his hand on my shoulder held me down.

I tried not to let it show how much he had unsettled me, but I couldn't help the quiver that rocked through me, as his hand slipped under my hair and closed around the back of my neck securely. He lowered his head, until my eyes could meet his, as I tried to hold my breathing steady and not let the fear I felt show.

This was nothing but another power play, an effective one at that. I tried to relax under the grip of his hand, but it was hard.

"Lisa, I could have killed you at any point over the past two years, since I've known of your whereabouts, if I had so wished."

I met his gaze unflinchingly. "Perhaps you were waiting till you could do it yourself," I said evenly.

"I have to admit your sharp tongue has been a pain at times, but killing you would be such a waste!" As he said that, his hand left my neck to slide around and pull my chin up.

His smile disappeared, as his thumb stroked the healing cut on my cheek bone. "Who did this?"

"One of your men!"

"I will see that he is dealt with!"

Which meant killed, I dryly acknowledged in unspoken terms.

"You needn't bother, he's already dead." I replied.

"Good girl!" he said, stroking my cheek once more with his thumb before letting go entirely, for which I was grateful.

He moved to his chair and sat down a little too heavily. He was getting older.

He studied me for a little while.

"Since we have settled the issue of you not being here to kill me, nor I you, what is the real reason for this visit?"

"What's going on, father?"

He looked away, out over the ocean, and then back to me, "The same thing that has been going on for thousands of years, ever since Alexander the Great! The world wants our treasure!"

"It's not your treasure! It's the people's!"

His gaze grew stormy.

I shook my head slightly, "How do you expect me to trust you when you say you have no intention of killing me? You were ready to kill me at sixteen, when I wouldn't tell you what I know about the treasure. Tell me father, what's changed?"

His expression grew serious. "Despite what you may have thought, I was not going to kill you, but I did push you too far. That was very foolish of you to swim across such an expanse of water at night. But it also took strength and courage, both of which, you know, I admire. To be the success you have become in your own right without any help from me, well that has been exceptional to see. You have exceeded all your brothers and sisters in that one regard alone. I look at you and I see more of myself than I can say of any of them!" he said, gesturing towards the house.

"You have made me proud!" he finished on a deep note, but I was not impressed.

"Flattery won't get you any closer to the treasure of our people, dear father."

His expression turned rueful and he shrugged his massive shoulders, "It was worth a shot."

I shook my head and looked out toward the sea. "Why did you have to torture those men like that? Couldn't you have just put a bullet in their heads, if they had betrayed you in some way?"

"They were warned what would happen to them if they talked. They thought I would forget. NO Examples had to be made of them! You do not cross Iya Muatombo and live!" he said, slamming his hand down on the table for emphasis.

"It's because of their betrayal that your life is now in danger!" he exclaimed further.

"How is that possible?"

He looked at me disgustedly and reached across the table to smack me in the head.

“I taught you to think better than that. What have your years of being a detective not taught you? They both, after betraying me, moved to New York City because it’s one of the best places in which to hide. Philippe, ever the gambler, got into debt and had to pull off risky jobs in order to feed his expensive habits! He got caught and he told the Americans what he knew to get out of the bind he was in. The stupid Americans let the Chinese steal the information away from them, right under their noses, and now they too want the treasure and that isn’t the worst of it! Ahmed did Philippe one better! He sold his information to terrorists, who will stop at nothing to get the treasure. Imagine a terrorist network in full control of an unlimited source of wealth such as the treasure of our people! It would be a disaster! I have taken what I wanted and I have broken the laws of many nations, but never have I wanted the world wide chaos of anarchy that might come of such a terrorist group. It is they that tried to kill you. Even though they do not yet know you are my daughter, they know you are a capable detective and they don’t want you to decipher the riddle before they do. And, as far as the Americans are concerned, they too will try to shoot you in the back. As for the Chinese, they would kidnap you and torture you more vilely than I ever would, in order to learn of your secrets! Because of these two men, your life is now in danger!”

“I didn’t know you cared so much for me!” I said, with heavy sarcasm lacing my tone of voice.

Father pointed a stern finger at me, “I did not lie when I said I was proud of who you have become!”

We both looked at each other for a long moment and then I glanced away at the ocean, as we, by mutual agreement, let the silence lengthen.

Well, I had my answers. My father was guilty of murder once again, and yet he was one of the few people in the world that, because of wealth and connections, would never be brought to justice.

I had a terrorist cell that wanted me dead so I didn’t spoil their fundraiser for their next global jihad. I was a prime candidate to be seized by the CIA or some other agency and water boarded until they had what they needed to reinstate the gold standard and kill inflation, all done in the name of what was best for the greater good of the people. And then, of course, there were the Chinese who would throw me in a hell hole somewhere and rape and beat me practically to death until I told them what they wanted.

Then, they would let me mercifully die, rotting in a cell somewhere far from the range of any media attention. It was a rather bleak future to consider.

I really should have just kept driving, but it was too late for that now.

“I can protect you.”

I looked over at father, studying him and his offer.

He appeared sincere enough, but it was a self evident truth that my father’s deals always got back far more than they gave out.

“Does anyone know of what significance I am in finding the treasure?”

“No, I don’t think so. That is, other than your brothers and sisters, and you can be sure that they have plans of their own!”

He looked away, his gaze troubled, and then, surprisingly, he admitted, “I’m no longer in control of everything like I used to be. It is hard to grow old.”

That was a shocking revelation coming from my father. I was surprised his ego would allow him to admit such a thing.

I got up and he looked at me speculatively.

“Am I free to go or are you going to hold me here as your prisoner?” I asked uncertainly.

“You are free to go, but I will be watching.”

“I never doubted it, father.”

I turned to go, but he caught my arm.

“The detective that saved your life, I am very grateful to him. I set up trust funds for his two

children to be managed by their mother.”

That further revelation shocked me. I knew he was just trying to buy my affection, but he hadn't had to do it in that way.

“I thank you for that.”

He nodded and let go.

I had taken several steps, when I came back to stand before my father. He looked up, a little surprised I think.

“What do you know, if anything, about a man who goes by the name of Flint?”

His eyebrows rose dramatically and he stood up, “What has he to do with this?”

“I think he wants the treasure too. You know of him then?”

“He very nearly succeeded in killing me once!” Father boomed out loudly.

I smiled, feeling a little knot of tension unravel inside of me.

He stared angrily at me, not liking my smile. “What are you thinking?”

It was a little daring, but I couldn't hold myself back from saying, “Knowing that he wanted to kill you is something of a personal recommendation to me.”

His face clouded up and I realized then that I had said too much. But then he further surprised me by bursting out laughing, “I have missed you and your sharp tongue! Will you not stay for dinner?”

I wouldn't even begin to dream of that!

I stepped back quickly, “No, the ferry is waiting for me and I must go!” I said quickly.

“Very well then, go; send Marshawn down to me on your way out.”

I nodded and headed back to the car.

Was I really going to get out of here? He had to have some plan in play, but what was it?

I drew near a group of gathered men that had been standing and watching the entire interchange between me and father.

They were all my brothers and yet they looked at me with calculated dislike, which I let sheet off me as best as I could. It would not do to show that I was intimidated at this stage of the game.

Picking Marshawn out of the bunch, I jerked my head back toward father and said, “He wants you.”

And that was all. I got in my car and left, thanking God all the way for a miracle.

Marshawn drew near the table and stopped. A chess board was laid out on the table. He'd never cared for the game, but he'd found himself stuck playing it with his father on more than one occasion.

“Tell me Marshawn, do you hate your sister as the others do?” Iya asked, without looking up.

Marshawn shrugged his shoulders, “She's threatened nothing of mine. I see no reason to hate her until she does.”

Iya looked up at him, “Who was your mother?”

Not at all put out, Marshawn responded, “The French whore from New Orleans.”

Iya nodded. “I like you Marshawn; you have learned the value of being content with what you have, a virtue that I have never bothered to pursue.”

Iya pointed to the chess board. “Which one of these pieces are you?”

Marshawn thought about it for a moment and then pointed to a pawn.

“Very true and you have value as such, but which of these pieces do you think your sister is?”

Iya didn't wait for him to answer, but picked up the queen, “She is the queen, the most powerful of all the pieces. Do I make myself clear?”

Marshawn nodded.

“Get your rifle and take one of the motor boats. Get to the landward dock before your sister does and see her safely on her way. If any of your brothers or sisters gets in the way, shoot them! You have my blessing and I will see that twenty million dollars is added to your account.”

Marshawn nodded, hiding the surprise at the amount of favor just shown to him. He was curious about something, "Which of the pieces are you, Father?"

"I'm none of them. I'm the master that plays all of them. Now go and earn your money!"

Marshawn hurried off and Iya got up and headed back to the house and the welcoming committee that had formed.

His sons, Iya thought to himself in disgust. They had his heartless cruelty, but none of his cunning.

One son stepped forward, "You should not have let her go! They will capture her and get the secrets of the treasure from her! It was foolish to let her out of your hand!"

Iya simply nodded and started to walk past him, but in a quick move he caught his son with a hand to the throat and another to the back of the head and twisted sharply.

The loud snap of his son's neck had the others backing up a step and Iya let his full contempt for them show. "Until one of you conniving jackals mans up enough to kill me, I rule! What I say goes! You do not question my motives or actions!"

He let the body of his son fall to the ground and continued on toward the house.

Rocco stood there and Iya came to a stop. "You agree with my actions?"

Rocco was no fool and had known better than to stand with the others in direct confrontation with their father. "He got what he deserved for questioning your leadership, father," he glibly responded.

Without warning, Iya viciously backhanded Rocco so hard that he broke his nose and knocked him to the ground.

"And now, so have you!" Iya gritted out.

Rocco, holding a hand to his nose, looked up at his father, profoundly puzzled.

"The next time you so much as touch your sister is the day you die, Rocco! Whether I'm alive or not, I will see that it happens, doubt me not on this matter!"

Iya turned from him and strode into the front entryway of the house, his back straight and head proudly held high. He was still the lord of his patch of the jungle.

I couldn't believe it! I was almost free! Then I saw the two men and a woman standing on the dock and I knew what I was in for.

These three of my siblings ran together as a pack, they always had. They were full blood siblings and the two brothers felt that their sister should have occupied the spot in the family that had been given to me.

I'd had nothing to do with receiving the honor or, more aptly, the curse that had been bestowed upon me by my great-grandmother.

That I had no choice in the matter didn't occur to them. All three were jealous and as spiteful as hungry dogs cheated out of a bone.

As the ferry came in closer the two brothers pulled out pistols. Seconds later there were the echoing reports of two sharp rifle shots spaced closely together. Both brothers dropped their pistols and clutched at their shattered hands.

My eyes drifted to the side to see Marshawn casually leaning against the corner of a dockyard building. He gave a casual wave followed by a cheeky grin.

It would appear that my father did want me alive for the time being. I got in my car and, when the ferry gates opened, I was gone as fast as the tires would spin. I had a long night of driving ahead of me, but I didn't care because I was free.

Chapter Nine

Mystery Man

It was past ten o'clock and all was dark on the island.

The reflection of the moon off the ocean's surface cast just enough light to see by. He should have been inside enjoying one of his women or a couple of them for that matter, but Iya had no desire for such amusements tonight.

He felt restless, even worried. It wasn't like him to worry about anything. All of his life, he had stared life in the face and surged on without a care for tomorrow or what might happen, only living for the day.

He had been young then. He wasn't now. He had felt his age creeping up on him over the past few years in leaps and bounds.

The decrease in his abilities made him wonder how long he could yet remain in control. The wolves were circling and he had not yet attained his share of immortality.

He had to stay strong for yet a little while longer and then he would have what he had always wanted, the respect of his people for generations to come.

It wouldn't matter, all the things that he had done up until this point, once he had achieved what he had been striving for all his life. He would be loved and even worshiped for countless generations to come. For that it was worth holding out. That was worth risking everything.

He just hoped his daughter could come through for him. If anyone could do it, she could. His wandering thoughts came to a halt and he sat up straighter in the chair.

He was sitting on the same patio in the lawn as he had been earlier in the day with Lisa. Something was different in the night.

A new element had been added to the peaceful tranquility of the crashing waves on the shore below. And then he saw the tall figure of a man striding up out of the waves, out of the foamy backwash of the sea itself. Iya's face split into a huge grin, even as the feeling of danger descended upon him.

He needed that feeling to live, like some people needed air to breath. It was part of who he was and it was also what had helped him to become great.

Iya poured some more wine into his glass and then set another glass upright and poured it full, as the figure from the beach made his way up the steeply grassed lawn.

The man came abreast of the table, sat down across from Iya and took a drink from the glass that Iya had pushed across to him.

"The swim, how was it?" Iya asked in a jovial manner.

"Long," was all the stranger said.

Iya's mock joviality dimmed a bit, "So, why have you come, Flint? I agreed not to encroach on your territory, so why have you come to mine?"

Flint idly held the glass of wine, as he relaxed back into his chair. "You have something I want."

"That simple, huh?"

"That simple," Flint affirmed.

"And what if I don't give you what you seek?" responded Iya.

"I'll find a way. You know I always complete what I start," Flint responded evenly, as he took another sip of the wine.

Iya sat back laughing and slapped his thigh, "Oh to the gods, I wish I had sons like you!"

On a quieter note he added, "As it is, I wasn't entirely unlucky. I did get one good daughter."

Flint leaned forward and sat the wine glass back onto the table. "Yes, about her, I want her too."

Consumed by another fit of laughter, Iya managed to hack out, "You don't ask for much, do you my friend! You want my treasure and my prized daughter! You tried to kill me and you think I'm just going to hand her over to you?"

"Oh, I didn't ask you to hand her over to me, but as her father I was simply letting you know of my intentions towards her. It will be her choice whether she'll have me or not."

Iya grunted, frankly amused at the turn the game had taken. He admired and respected Flint, that is what little even he knew about him, which said a lot to the man's proficiency in keeping a low profile.

It could be very useful having such a man as Flint as a son in-law, if things worked out that way and, if he got in the way later on, he could always be rubbed out.

"I have no doubt that you are often successful, given your prior track record in nearly killing me, but she is beyond you my friend," Iya responded rather honestly.

Flint remained silent so Iya volunteered. "She was here today, which I'm sure you already know. She even asked about you and I would even go as far as to say that she may even like you. But, unfortunately for you, she will never willingly be intimate with any man."

"Yeah, I noticed that, but I think she has come along farther than you think."

Iya shook his head, "No, I don't think so. She hides it well, but she's still a scared little girl inside."

Flint picked up his wine glass again. "Since you're being so helpful, perhaps you can fill me in a little more on what happened to her."

Iya shrugged, "Why not? It started with her mother. She was a very beautiful woman. I bought her at a black market auction in Spain. She came from a very noble family in the south of Italy. Her father had squandered the family fortune and he got the great idea that he could make some money with his oldest daughter. He made her disappearance appear as a kidnapping, while he actually sold her instead. He did the same in the following years to her younger sisters. He was eventually caught and sent to jail, where he had a rough time of it from his fellow inmates. He didn't last long. I brought Lisa's mother back here to the island. She fought me tooth and nail. I still have the scars! She had almost as much pride as I did, but she tamed down some once she had Lisa. She poured herself into protecting that girl. Lisa's mother was special and I kept her exclusively to myself. I mean that I didn't share her with my twin brother, which was a mistake. My twin brother grew jealous and, when I was gone, he raped her for days and then killed her. He raped Lisa as an afterthought and would have killed her too, but my men stopped him, because she was of my blood. I was angry with my brother, but he was of my very own blood and she was but a good lay, so I let it pass and just gave him a good beating. I waited to see what would become of Lisa. Alone and without a mother she was picked on by the other children and their mothers, but she surprised me by how hard she fought to survive. She really surprised me one night when she was twelve. She snuck into my brother's room and killed him and his favorite woman, who had picked on her the most. The others gave her a wider berth after that. She is tough, but in some ways very fragile. Now that you see what you're up against, what do you think?"

Flint didn't say anything, but just continued to stare at Iya idly, caressing the stem of the glass with a finger.

"You think I'm a monster, don't you?"

"You said it, not me." Flint said, as he stood up.

Iya was mildly surprised that Flint was leaving. They really hadn't discussed much of anything of importance, yet.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, the figure of a man materialized from the direction of the house. "Get what we came here for, Tyre?" Flint asked.

“Yes,” was all the slimmer man responded.

“What have you stolen from me?” Iya demanded loudly.

Flint glanced over at him, “I asked nicely and you said no, so what did you expect me to do, go home without it? Thanks for the drink by the way.”

Flint and the other man headed back towards the beach as Iya fumed. He had been played! Flint had been nothing more than a diversion. He’d gotten the best of him, yet again!

Iya’s hand reached for the pistol that was strapped to the underside of the table.

Flint looked back, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you Iya, you wouldn’t want to be cancelled out of the game this early on, would you?”

Iya glanced down at his chest, where a little red laser dot danced and he relaxed his grip on the pistol handle.

“It would appear that you have won tonight,” Iya had to admit grimly, as he watched the two men walk down the slope and disappear into the surf.

The red light went away and a few minutes later he heard an outboard motor start up. He sat there, filled with rage at the way he had been duped.

Oh well, they may be closer, but they still didn’t have what they needed to find the treasure.

Galloway let the rifle down and helped pull first Flint and then Tyre into the boat.

“How did the big he-bull take it?” Galloway asked curiously.

“Not well!” responded Flint with a broad grin, but his companion was more reserved.

Tyre was, in fact, the very essence of the word reserved, with somber running in a close second.

“Flint, I found a couple more clues, but I didn’t see anything as to where the actual treasure is,” Tyre said cautiously.

Flint patted him on the shoulder, “That’s okay, because I found the key that unlocks the door.”

Galloway looked him up and down, “Well, where is it?”

“I don’t have it with me, but I know what it looks like.”

“What does it look like?” Galloway asked cautiously.

“5’11” of perfectly proportioned symmetry, coated in a honey chocolate glaze, capped off with a pair of expressive black eyes, long black curly hair and a smile to die for.” Flint responded with a grin.

“The detective!” exclaimed Galloway.

“One and the same,” Flint said, still smiling.

“You think she’s just going to tell you where the treasure is?” Galloway asked in open skepticism.

“I’m hoping so,” Flint said.

“What if she doesn’t? I’m not into roughing up chicks!” Galloway responded heatedly.

Flint gave him a reproachful look. “And when have you known me to be?”

“There was that Asian chick in Singapore.”

“She was trying to cut my fingers off and feed them to me!”

“There was that social debutant in France last year.”

“She was a black widow and had a machete, with which she was trying to take off my head!”

“Then there was that woman in Istanbul.”

“Now, that was an accident! How was I supposed to know that monster was a woman?”

Tyre half choked on a burst of laughter.

“Yes!” exclaimed Galloway, as he and Flint smacked hands together victoriously. Tyre just shook his head and started up the outboard motor.

For years the two of them had made a game of trying to crack up Tyre’s somber façade and when they succeeded it was cause for celebration over a hard won victory.

“Seriously Flint, what are we going to do if she doesn’t tell us what she knows?” Galloway asked loudly, in order to be heard over the noise of the motor prop.

“We’ll keep her safe. As long as she is safe the treasure remains buried.”

“And I guess you’re just the man for that special protective detail, aren’t you?” Galloway said knowingly.

Flint just smiled back in return.

Chapter Ten

Lifeline

I walked into the precinct nursing the cup of coffee in my hands. Immediately, I noticed the extra flurry of activity and new faces in the office. What was going on?

I found Sal at my desk. He refused to meet my eyes and I knew something was up.

“Who are all these people, Sal?”

“Better question would be, who’s not here. Homeland Security and half a dozen or so other agencies, I even heard a guy mention that the CIA is involved!”

“In our case?” I asked.

He looked down and mumbled something.

“Speak up, Sal!” I said sharply.

“They took us off the case.”

“They what!” I exclaimed loudly.

He just nodded.

I slammed my coffee cup down and headed for the Captain’s office. I burst through the door and he stood up and asked, “Where have you been, Lisa?”

“Chasing down a lead. What’s this about being off the case?” I asked heatedly.

“It’s true, you’re off it. You’re too personally involved and the case has stretched past our jurisdiction. It’s apparently become an international affair.”

“I’m not giving this case up! I’m going to find Rafferty’s killers and bring them to justice!”

“It’s no longer a decision for you to make! Consider yourself temporarily relieved of duty! Turn in your badge,” the Captain said angrily with a sharp gesture to his desk.

I slammed my badge down on his desk and turned to leave, “And your gun!”

I turned back, “They weren’t aiming for Rafferty! They were aiming for me! Do you think it’s smart for me to be on the streets without a gun, you idiot?”

“You’re in contempt, Lisa! The only reason I don’t lock you up is because of the friendship we’ve had over the years and the Lisa I know wouldn’t be acting like this! Now put your gun down, go home and don’t come back until I tell you!”

I pulled my gun out of its holster and set it down on the desk.

In a calmer tone, the Captain said, “I’m sorry about all this Lisa, but this is for your own good. You have to trust me, as your friend, when I tell you that.”

“You know what they say Captain, with friends like you, who needs enemies.”

I closed the door behind me and went back to my desk. I pulled a bag out of a drawer and threw into it what little stuff there was of mine worth keeping.

I opened the bottom drawer and saw the sketch book lying there. I grabbed it and stuffed it into the bag on impulse.

I didn’t need anyone drawing incorrect conclusions on top of everything else, not to mention the private nature of the sketches.

I slung the bag’s strap over my shoulder, “Stay out of trouble Sal.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked worriedly.

“Start some fires and burn down some bridges.” I didn’t wait around for him to try to convince me otherwise, I just left.

The Captain's phone rang and he answered it, "Hello?"

"How did she take it? Do you think she'll cooperate and stand down?"

"No, she's not going to stand down! I told you that! It's not in her to give up!"

"That is unfortunate for her."

"Wait, what are you going to do?"

"That is no longer your concern."

The line went dead and the Captain put the phone down shakily. He needed a drink, was his overwhelming thought. He reached for the lower drawer of his desk and the alcohol it contained, stashed under some folders.

I was about to hail a cab figuring that would be safer than walking, when a squad car pulled over. The narcotics detective from the cell crime scene poked his head out the passenger window.

"Heard what happened in there, raw deal! Can I give you a lift to your apartment? Might be safer that way."

I smiled with real appreciation, "Thank you, detective."

I opened the back door of the sedan and, in stunned horror, I felt a tazer jammed to my throat from somebody behind me on the street, and then I was tumbling into the back seat of the car.

I lifted my head off the seat and coughed. I opened my eyes; I was still in the squad car.

"Sorry Lisa, you're a good detective and I hate to do this to you, but the powers that be say you gotta go."

"Then why don't you just put a bullet in my brain and be done with it?" I asked slowly, as my faculties came unfrozen.

My throat hurt from where the tazer had been jammed into it. I started to reach up to rub it when I realized my hands were cuffed together.

"So, how's it going to be?" I asked, trying to find out more of what was going on.

"Harder than you deserve. Again, I'm sorry, it's just the way it's gotta be. No hard feelings."

And that's as much as either of the two men in the front seat would say. I looked around and didn't recognize where we were in the city at all, but it didn't look good. I must have been out for a while.

I saw a street sign and something seized up within me. This was a very bad section of the city. Cops didn't come here and, if they did, they certainly didn't come alone and unarmed.

When I sat up straighter, I saw the items laying on the front seat between the two men; my badge and my gun.

So, the betrayal went that far up the chain of command.

I couldn't say that I had ever thought of the Captain, of all people, as being capable of something like this. Just went to show a person the value of not trusting anyone. But that wasn't right either, some people you could trust with anything.

Rafferty would never have done this to me, even if they'd had his family at gun point. Instinctively, I knew that with enough leverage Sal might cave in, but I didn't think he had any part in this. I had no one left that I could really trust, unless perhaps for one man.

Could I really trust Flint?

I was going to have to find out, because he might be my only chance, if I was to survive past today. Everything would come down to getting hold of a phone.

The remembered phone number burned bright in my head with the urgency of my need. I had to get a

phone!

I'd never make it out of this section of the city alone, especially without a gun. The squad car came to a stop and the two men got out. The detective opened my door and started to haul me out of the back, but I resisted. He tugged harder and I gave up my resistance. We both stumbled backward from the car and I brushed into him.

He reared back and backhanded me across the face as he drew his gun, taking aim at my head.

"Nice try Lisa, but no dice! Don't give us any more trouble or you'll regret it! Take the cuffs off!"

The patrol cop took the cuffs off as I stood still, nursing my split lip with my tongue. Both men backed away toward the car.

"You're going to regret not putting a bullet in my head while you had the chance, detective!" I said with meaning.

"I don't think so," he said, before he slammed his door shut. They took off up the block of this slummy corner of the city, as if eager to escape hell.

As soon as they were far enough away, I ducked into an alleyway, hoping to stay out of sight of any potential enemies, and brought the detective's phone up to my ear, after feverishly dialing the number that Flint had given me.

"Come on! Come on!" I whispered, as the phone rang and rang.

I had almost given up hope, when Flint's unmistakable voice came on the line, "*Lisa?*"

I didn't want to examine too closely the wave of relief I felt at the sound of his voice and words rushed out of me in a torrent.

"They set me up! The Captain's in on it and I don't know who else! I don't know who I can trust in the precinct! You said to call if I needed help and, and..."

"*You did the right thing,*" he said cutting off my stammering. "*Where are you right now?*"

I told him and the pause on the phone was telling.

"*That's a bad area, Lisa!*"

I couldn't help the quiver in my tone as I responded, "I know! I saw my badge and gun on the front seat of the car when they brought me here. I think they made a deal with a gang to make my death look like random mob violence."

I thought I heard muted swearing from the other end of the line. I didn't know this man from Adam and yet I could tell he cared and I needed someone to care right now, because I was losing it.

"If it's gangs they've made a deal with, they won't just kill me, they'll..."

His voice cut me off, his tone serious and confident, "*Nothing like that is going to happen to you Lisa! Understand me?*"

I nodded jerkily, forgetting that there was no way he could see such an answer.

"*We're going to get you out of there, but you have to trust me!*"

I don't know why I trusted this man, but somehow I did.

"I believe you, what do you want me to do?" As I finished the words I saw movement further up the street from my hiding spot.

"*I'm on my way to you, but it will take me a while. I have some friends that are a lot closer to you and they are already on their way. Keep your phone on and with you. It's probably best for you to keep moving away from where they dropped you off. And Lisa?*"

"Yes?"

"*Stay alive!*" The phone went dead.

It was clearly a gang coming down the street and they looked like they were hunting something; me!

I ducked back into the side alley and made my way out the back end of it to the parallel street. Every person I met on these streets would be an informant against me.

I ducked into side alleys and made my way up others. An old woman pointed me out to a group of gang members and for several fast paced moments I thought they had me, but I managed to slip away by ducking into an abandoned old building.

I glanced at my phone as I leaned back against an old brick façade, completely out of breath. It had only been a little over a half hour, but I could have sworn that it had been an hour or more since I had called my one and only lifeline.

Sweat rolled down my face and I felt my shirt sticking to me. My feet were killing me!

The high heeled boots I had worn to work today had been more of a fashion statement and not a choice based on practicality. I wanted to take them off, but braving the refuse and debris littered streets in my bare feet would be risking my life in a completely different way than meeting my end at the hands of a gang. I wasn't that desperate, yet!

The thought of my bare foot plunging down onto a discarded needle, likely contaminated with HIV, was a strong enough thought to keep these stupid boots on my feet, for at least a little longer anyway.

I heard a stirring at the other end of the alleyway and I took off running, as bullets began to splatter into the brick wall I had just been leaning against. I ran on down the alley. Bricks shattered to either side of me, coating me in red dust.

I felt a bullet burn across the top of my shoulder and then another one past my outer thigh, but I didn't stop running. Out onto the street there were more of them. This was bad!

As a group they took off after me yelling, and for fear of falling, wounded from a bullet, I ducked down another side alley only to find myself deceived.

It wasn't a side alley. It was an old recessed loading dock and the battered old doors were all locked.

"NO!" A sob of fear escaped, as the reality of how badly I was trapped swept through me.

I turned back to the main street only to find an eight gang member posse ringed across it coming towards me. I saw an old pipe and I grabbed it up. It wasn't a great defense, but it was something.

They drew closer to me and I could see they were laughing at my attempt at defense, even as their eyes scanned me up and down, hungrily. I took a firmer grip on the pipe and tried to push down my fears of what was likely to happen in this dark hole of the city.

"Hey baby, we can just as well do you with your hands shot off as with them still on. Drop the pipe!"

My grip on it remained and I watched, as the ringleader brought his pistol up, half hoping he'd miss my hands and kill me by accident.

"I wouldn't if I were you. I happen to know someone who quite likes the lady's hands the way the Creator made them."

The gang turned en mass to look at the speaker, who had approached out of seemingly nowhere to stand but twenty feet from them. He was on the slim side and wasn't very tall, standing only about 5'6". But it was how he was dressed that was eye catching in an oddly eclectic way.

He had a sharply creased fedora on his head, reminiscent of the gangster era of Hollywood, accompanied by a matching Dick Tracy rain coat. The outdated outfit was a little too ridiculous to take the individual wearing it seriously, but there was something about the smaller man that said seriousness was written all over him.

The gang leader spoke as he lifted his gun toward the stranger. "What's a little, white, funky dude like you interrupting our date with the half-breed chick for? I'm gonna plug you right where you stand, white boy!"

The stranger tipped back his hat a little to reveal a pair of cold slate grey eyes and then coolly said, "You have five seconds to drop your guns and leave this place alive. I won't warn you again." As he finished speaking the man's hands tucked the ends of the raincoat behind him, in the process partially revealing two low slung shoulder holsters packed with what looked like .45 caliber automatics from the same era as his clothes.

The gang members looked at each other as if to say 'Is this guy for real?', and then dissolved into

laughter, as they all started to draw their pistols. They were too late.

I had been mentally counting down the five seconds. Their time was up. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

One moment the stranger's hands had been at his sides and then they were holding the automatics, as fire belched out of them repeatedly. There had been eight gang members and there were eight shots, every one of them a head shot. It had taken less than a couple of seconds for the little man to clear the loading area.

He stepped over the bodies as he came up to me. He glanced at the pipe I still gripped in my hands and I saw the corners of his mouth twitch.

"The classic lead pipe was, no doubt, a lethal weapon, when wielded by the likes of Mrs. Plum or Scarlet, but the modern age calls for something a little more speed oriented I think."

He had holstered one pistol as he had approached and he reached behind his back with the now free hand to pull out a sleek looking 9mm, which he offered to me.

The little man had a point. I dropped the pipe and took the offered pistol, instantly feeling better.

"Thank you, mister..." I asked hesitantly.

"Tyre, at your service Ma'am," he said, touching the tip of his hat brim before he turned and headed back out toward the street. I broke out of my trance and quickly stepped over the fallen gang members to follow after the man. Another book character of the same mysterious international private agency it would seem.

Tyre may have lacked the physical presence of raw strength that Flint manifested, but he lacked nothing in lethality of skill. As we made it to the street he drilled three more gang members who came rushing up with guns, before I could even raise mine halfway.

He stood there in the street and appeared to be waiting for someone, as he calmly reloaded his small cannons.

Hesitantly I asked, "Do you have transportation out of here?"

As if I had touched on the source of some private pain he grimaced and said, "Yes, unfortunately I do."

I didn't understand his apparent pain at the thought of transportation out of here. Why would that be a bad thing?

I heard a screech of tires, followed by the throaty roar of an engine with horses left over to spare. I turned to see a short bed, black dodge pickup peel around a corner a block down from us.

Tyre didn't seem concerned so I stayed beside him, even though it looked like the truck was going to hit us.

The truck swerved to the side at the last moment and came to a screeching halt. The passenger side door swung out, as the driver leaned across the middle and pushed it open.

A blast of an old country music ballad in full swing reverberated out of the cab of the truck to be heard over the sound of the engine.

"Hop in babe!" came the salacious statement of the capable looking driver.

I complied quickly, as I began to sense some of the reason for Tyre's grimace. I had no sooner gotten in than the driver stomped on the gas, flinging me back against the seat.

Turning to see that the door of the cab had slammed shut, I, in a panic, turned back to the driver. "What about Tyre?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, he likes the open spaces," said the driver, gesturing with a hand to the back.

I glanced through the back window to see Tyre crouched down with a semiautomatic rifle across his knees behind the truck's tailgate.

"Shouldn't we stop and let him up here?"

"What? Oh, he'll be fine! Speaking of fine, you're every bit as hot as the boss described you! Name's Galloway," he said, reaching over to shake my hand.

I shook it responding, "Lisa."

He hadn't stopped his frank perusal of me, "Hey, could you please keep your eyes on the road a little more!" I said, not liking his in-depth study of my body or the alarmingly close course of the truck with the side of the street.

"What?" he asked, staring at me blankly.

He glanced out the front window and steered the truck back on track moments before we would have collided with a dumpster. "Sorry about that!" he said.

I heard a semiautomatic rifle begin to talk and glanced back to see maybe three or more vehicles pursuing us. The bed of the truck began to fill with brass casings, as Tyre emptied clip after clip into the pursuing vehicles. I heard Galloway say something sharply under his breath and I glanced ahead.

Several blocks ahead, the street narrowed and a car and an SUV swung broadways, barricading the street, even as gunmen poured out of them to take cover and aim at us.

Galloway stuck his head out his open window and slapped the side of the truck loudly, before yelling out to Tyre, "I need a door opened up little buddy!"

Tyre glanced around and saw the blockade. He laid the rifle down, crawled towards the back of the cab and started working away at something.

"Oh my ...!" My voice trailed off, as I saw Tyre lift a rocket launcher out of a case and up to his shoulders, as he stood up to aim it over the top of the cab.

The plume of the rocket trail arched away in front of us and the car exploded in a ball of flames. Moments later, with the launcher reloaded, a second trail arched out and crashed into the SUV.

"Hang on, honey!" belted out Galloway and I found the seatbelt in a hurry.

"Oh God!" I said clutching the golden cross at my throat.

We hit the burning vehicles.

It really wasn't as bad as I had thought it was going to be. The air bags didn't even deploy and I said as much.

Galloway looked over at me with a cheeky grin, "What air bags?"

I just shook my head and glanced back to see if Tyre was okay. I was in time to see the lead pursuit car blown sky high as it passed through the burning wreckage of the other two vehicles.

I watched Tyre set the launcher down. There were no more signs of pursuit after that display of firepower.

We drove for a while and Galloway broke into my thoughts with a question, "Are you okay?"

I glanced over at him and was surprised by his look of concern. He indicated my cheek and I touched it to find that I had been crying. I hadn't known I had been crying.

"Thank you for coming for me," I said fervently.

His jovial demeanor restored, he smiled back at me, "Don't mention it. Me and Tyre save maidens from gang raping hordes every day." He said it as a joke, but in reality that's just what they had done.

After several more minutes of driving, Galloway pulled the truck over to the curb. "It would be a little conspicuous to drive this truck any further, as bad as it's shot up. The safe house isn't far from here. Tyre will take you there while I ditch the truck."

I nodded and got out.

Tyre was instantly by my side, directing me. Walking wasn't what I wanted to be doing right now, the way my feet felt, but I had to play by their rules. We walked several blocks and I got a lot of, 'What happened to you?' looks. Tyre pointed ahead at a town house door and said, "That's it. The doors open and it will lock behind you. Flint should be along any minute. I'll stay around the area just to make sure everything stays okay."

He turned to go, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Thank you for what you did for me back there."

He'd lost his hat, but he touched the air where the brim would have been anyway.

"Anything for a lady," he said softly, before continuing on along the sidewalk.

I limped up the stairs and turned the knob, halfway believing that the door wouldn't open and that I'd be left exposed here all by myself. The door opened and with a sigh of relief I stepped in and closed the door. Bars slid out of the wall and clanged shut and steel mesh slid down from the ceiling, as I shut the door. Breathing heavy I stepped back from the door. They'd warned me.

It would take an explosive charge to get through the locked door now. I was further off grid at the moment than I had perhaps ever been since growing up on the island. Just what had I stumbled into?

The house was elegantly furnished and immaculately clean and I, in comparison, felt dirty and disgusting. Light streamed into a sitting area and I sat down on the corner of an ottoman.

Everything seemed to catch up with me in that moment. My angst over visiting my father, Rafferty's death, and now the fear I had experienced today. It was all too much to hold onto and I fell apart in the quiet sanctity of this safe place.

I sobbed hard as I clutched myself with my arms. I was all alone!

Through the blurriness of my tears, I saw Flint kneel down in front of me. I don't know where he came from, but that didn't matter. He was here and I was glad to see him, stranger that he was. I melted against his chest, relishing the strength of the arms that closed securely around me.

How had I managed to live the twenty seven years of my life without the comfort I felt from the big hands rubbing my back and the comforting aroma of his masculine presence? I didn't know, but I never wanted to be without it again!

He held me for a long time and then, picking me up, said, "We need to get you cleaned up. I bet a nice, hot shower would feel good."

That did sound really good. Dimly I noticed that he was climbing stairs and then he set me down in a luxurious looking bathroom.

"You've got fluffy towels, a fuzzy bathrobe, and all that feminine hair gunk you females seem to think you need. I think you're set."

I smiled a little. This must be a female's domain.

Whose female?

He answered my jealous question without meaning to do so, "This all belongs to a female coworker of mine. You'll probably meet her sometime in the future. Use whatever you need to, I know she wouldn't mind. She has clothes in the other room. The pants might not fit, as you're several inches taller, but you're both similarly curvy and well..." he stumbled for a second, "endowed, so the shirts and other stuff should fit."

I could see him struggling not to, but his eyes drifted downward to see the evidence of his words.

I minded it a lot when the Galloways of the world eyed me over, but Flint was different. I wanted him to look.

He looked away, out the door. "Well, you have what you need. I'll lay out some clothes for you. If you throw your dirty clothes into the other room, I'll get rid of them."

He started to go without ever looking back at me. "Flint, could you do me another favor please?"

He looked at me, "Sure anything!"

"Could you get me some more comfortable shoes to wear? I can pay!"

He glanced down at my boots and visibly winced, "Ouch! Yeah sure, what's your size?"

I told him and he was gone, closing the door behind him. I stripped off everything, noticing the bullet burns on my shoulder and thigh for the first time. I had been very lucky. No, make that blessed.

The bullets hadn't really penetrated; they'd just burned a few skin layers off and bled a little. They'd burn in the shower, but they needed to be cleaned.

I gathered up the clothes and the boots and, standing behind the door, I dropped them all outside into the other room.

I heard him coming to pick them up. My head rested on the door. How was I going to tell him?

Unbelievably I felt my lips curl into a smile. This was so unlike me!

“Flint?” I called out softly.

“Yes?”

I bit my lip trying not to let the humor I felt come out in my tone. “You said I’m several inches taller than your coworker and I bet I’m a little wider in the torso and just bigger in general all around.”

There was silence on the other side of the door.

“Her bras and underwear probably aren’t going to fit, even though we may look the same cup size.”

Not waiting for a response, I continued, “Do you have a pen and paper?”

I heard the clothes fall and then Flint scrambling around the room.

He came back; “Go ahead,” came the husky response.

I told him my sizes and that of shirt and pant sizes as well.

“Okay, I got it.”

“Flint?”

“Yes?”

How did I explain the hellish atrocities of female clothes shopping to him?

“Just because you buy clothes that match the sizes that I’ve given you, doesn’t mean they’ll fit me.”

“What?” came his reasonably doubtful reply.

“Different manufacturers size women’s clothes differently than the size they are supposed to be.”

“Well, that’s stupid!”

I couldn’t deny him the logic of that statement. I told him what store to go to and the brand names.

“This is going to take a little while,” he said hesitantly.

“That’s okay.”

I heard him leaving and I called out, “I appreciate this a lot, Flint!”

I couldn’t make out his reply.

I thought of him bumbling around the women’s department at my favorite store and a gurgle of laughter escaped me. The picture of him, all big and masculine, sorting through lingerie in search of my size was priceless.

I could never have imagined being so intimate with a man as to feel comfortable with him picking out my clothes for me. I had thought that would never be a possibility in my life, but it was and I was enjoying every moment of it.

“Oh, I hope he’s not color blind!” I said to myself with a groan, as I stepped into the hot shower.

After a long shower I took a bath, completely spoiling myself. I made full use of the bath oils and general plethora of female gunk, as he had put it and came walking out of the bathroom cinched up in the fluffy bath robe at the same time as he came walking through the door with bags in each hand.

A lot of bags!

What had he done, bought the whole store?

He was looking at me with an unsettled look on his face, as he took in my robed appearance, wet hair and all. I rather liked the impact I was apparently making on him.

He seemed to gather his wits about him and set the bags down on the bed.

Coming to the bed beside him I exclaimed, “You didn’t have to buy all this! You must have spent a fortune!”

He hadn’t stopped looking at me and I watched as he shrugged, “Money isn’t a problem at the moment and I thought you could use a few extra changes of clothes.”

I fingered the material of a shirt as I softly asked, “Why?”

He looked away for a moment and then back to me and sighed, as I studied him intently.

“To be bluntly honest, you’re in a lot of danger. You’re in danger while you’re with me and when you’re not. I like to think that I’d be able to keep you safer if you’re with me and, to that intent, I plan on taking you with me when I leave the country in a few days.”

“Is keeping me safe the only reason why you’re taking me with you?”

He shook his head, "No, it's not the only reason."

I looked down at the clothes, "By now I know that you must know I play a significant role in finding what I think you and a lot of others are after. Is that the other reason why you want me with you?"

He met my renewed stare with an equally matched intensity of his own. "I'm fully aware of how important you are to what I'm looking for and knowing that is why I think you're safer with me. But it's not the reason why I'm taking you with me, other, that is, than also keeping you safe!"

"To trust what you're saying involves putting quite a lot of trust in you. I've been betrayed before."

"Not by me!" he said firmly, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Okay, I'll go with you willingly, but I'm keeping a gun at all times."

"Absolutely! Have three or four of them if you want. Now, I imagine that after all of today's events you've worked up a bit of an appetite."

Now that he mentioned it, I was starving.

He must have read the answer in my expression, "Get dressed and I'll take you out to dinner."

He had started to turn away, but then stopped, "I almost forgot. There was some blood on your clothes?"

"Just burns, nothing serious."

He pulled a little first aid kit out of a bag. "Still, you should take precaution and get it cleaned and bandaged properly."

Something wild went through me and I brushed by him and sat down on the bed in front of him. Reaching up, I pulled the robe off my shoulder.

He just looked at my bare shoulder and said, "I meant you."

"Well, you're here, so why not?"

He opened the kit and soon had the burn cleaned and bandaged. I let the robe slide back and then I pulled it up to reveal the outside of my thigh.

Hesitantly, he knelt down in front of me and soon had it treated as well. He glanced up at me and, as if more to himself than to me, he said, "I should probably go now."

He got up and went to the door and I followed him.

A little desperately I asked, "Flint?"

He turned back and I leaned up and kissed him.

He deepened the kiss and my hands were on their way up to wrap around his neck, when he caught them and leaned back, breaking the kiss.

We stared at each other, breathing heavy for a few moments. Why had he stopped?

"Today has been a very emotional day for you. Trust me, I'm not against kissing you and a lot more, but I'm not going to take advantage of how you're feeling right now. I think by now you've guessed how very much I want you, but I'm man enough to win you on my own merits and not take advantage of a weak moment on your part. Take your time getting dressed and, when you're ready, I'll take you out to dinner."

He let go of my hands, stepped back and closed the door softly.

I rubbed my hands into my eye sockets savagely.

What had I been doing?

What must he think of me?

This wasn't like me at all!

As embarrassed as I was right now, I wished I was still kissing him. One thing was for sure, he was showing me that I could trust him, even as I increasingly discovered that I couldn't trust myself, especially around him.

I looked through the clothes. He had done a very good job! Not everything was stuff that I would have bought, but it wasn't going to look bad on me either. It was just different, more colorful than my more reserved color choices often were.

Now all I had to do was to get dressed and go face him, after the fool I had made of myself. That wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter Eleven

Tenderness

I stepped down the stairs quietly, not wanting to be heard, but he was at the bottom waiting for me.

“Absolutely beautiful,” he said. I couldn’t meet his eyes and instead I felt my face flushing.

His fingers lifted my chin up and, before I knew what he was doing, he was kissing me.

When he drew back I stared at him, a little shocked. He reached up and rubbed a finger across my bottom lip sensuously before his eyes rose and met mine.

“There’s nothing wrong with kissing and I intend on kissing you a lot more. I just didn’t want our kiss earlier to go farther than our relationship should just yet. There is no reason why you should be embarrassed because of your kiss and invitation earlier. I want that too, just not yet, understand?”

“Yes.”

I paused for a moment. “Thank you for being a gentleman. I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

He smiled charmingly, “And fortunately for you, you’ll never have to meet another.”

He opened the front door from which all the bars and mesh had magically disappeared and ushered me out into the warm evening air, with a hand on the small of my back.

What had he meant by that last statement?

I had the best evening of my life. He took me to a swanky restaurant that I don’t think I’d have ever had the nerve to go to alone, much less be able to get a reservation to.

We walked right in and were seated at one of the best tables in the place, without a reservation. Apparently Flint was something of a regular here and one well liked by the owner.

We ate, but most of all we talked. I don’t exactly remember what we had talked about now, other than it had been a little bit about everything and nothing in particular.

It had been great, and sometime during the laughing and aimless talking I had fallen in love with him. I hadn’t wanted it to end, but he hadn’t disappointed me any when we had gotten back to the house, after our dinner had stretched past three hours in length.

He had taken me up to my room, pressed me back up against the door and kissed me into passionate oblivion. At some point he had stopped, opened the door and gently pushed me inside, before closing the door and walking away.

I had slipped the night dress on that he had been thoughtful enough to buy me and crawled into the super comfortable bed, my mind and heart awash with all things Flint.

“NO!!! Please stop hurting her! No please!”

“Wake up!”

I came awake with a start to find Flint beside the bed, shaking me.

With a sob I reached for him, as I cried out, “Don’t leave me!”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he said, as he slid into the bed to sit upright with his back against the headboard.

He pulled my head over onto his thigh and, with his hand on my back, began to rub away the bad

memory of the dream. After a while he began to stroke his fingers through my curly hair, not saying anything.

Sounding defensive, even to my own ears, I asked, "I suppose you want to know all about my nightmares?"

He didn't say anything and I was about to add something to the effect that it was none of his business when he said, "I met your father."

I'd pretty much figured out that he had to know who my father was by now.

"He told me you tried to kill him once. I wish you had," I responded softly.

He didn't correct me and tell me that was the wrong way to talk about a parent, and I was grateful for that. People often just didn't understand. Some people needed to be killed and my father was one of them. Like a poisonous snake slithering toward a playground full of kids, he needed his head chopped off.

"He told me what happened to you and your mother."

I bolted upright and turned on him. "He told you? He had no right!" I screamed and started to get off the bed.

He caught me and brought me back against his chest and held me there, while I struggled to be free.

It was no use. He had a strength that made my own appear nonexistent and I cared for him too much to smash my fist between his legs and incapacitate him, like any man would be after such a blow. I stopped struggling and let my head fall back against him.

"How can you even still want me?" I asked softly, feeling all broken up inside.

"The things that happen to us don't make us who we are unless we let them. Sometimes there are good things that come out of the experiences we have in life, but sometimes there are not. Sometimes we let bad experiences dictate our lives for us, instead of just letting those moments pass us by. What happened to you as a girl was awful, but it doesn't make you the person that I'm holding right now. But, it can stop you from enjoying what you were meant to have in life, if you let it. What happened to you will always be a part of your past, but it doesn't and shouldn't have anything to do with the way you live the rest of your life."

I just laid there. He was right, of course. I'd fought the same battle with myself over a million times it seemed. At least now I didn't have to fight it alone anymore.

I turned my head and kissed his neck and breathed out, "I love you!" against his neck too softly for him to hear.

I slid down, until I lay with my head on his thigh again. I played with the golden cross on my necklace.

"Did your mother give that to you? It's very unique. I've seen several others just like it in the past," he asked inquisitively.

My voice quivered slightly, "I took it off her body before they dumped her in the ocean for the sharks."

The toned muscles of his thigh twitched beneath my face and I glanced up and saw deep fury written across his face even though the gentle touch of his hand on my back hadn't changed.

He was mad clear through. It was nice having someone like him mad on my behalf. At some point I fell asleep, only to wake to him sitting on the corner of the bed fully dressed, as the sun's early rays were just beginning to pour through the windows.

"Come on sleepy head, the open road is calling our name," he said with a smile that was as warm as the sun outside.

I sat up and looked around. "Where are my clothes?"

"Already packed. I left some out for you over there. We'll get breakfast on the way," Flint said.

He went to the door saying over his shoulder, "See you in ten."

I hopped out of bed.

Ten minutes!

That wasn't enough time to get properly ready!

I walked down the stairs fifteen minutes later, my hair still wet.

He glanced at his watch, "Not bad!"

I rolled my eyes.

Outside, I was in for another shock. My car was pulled up at the curb. Was there nothing he didn't know about?

He beat me to it and swung the passenger side door open. I stopped, arching an eyebrow expressively.

His smile was boyishly charming. "I thought perhaps I could drive for you mademoiselle?"

"Be honest, you just want to drive my car don't you?"

"You're right, of course, may I?"

I sighed expressively and got into the passenger side. He slid into the driver's seat with a look of eagerness. He slid a pair of dark sunglasses on and, only half jokingly, I asked, "Promise me something?"

He turned to me, "Name it."

"Promise me your last name isn't Bond or Bourne or something like that."

He looked over the top of his dark glasses at me. "You have to admit I'm a little bigger than Bourne and, as for Bond, unlike him I have only one woman that I plan on seducing."

"Is that so? How's that working out for you?" I rejoined playfully.

He reached out, grasped the back of my neck and pulled me forward for a kiss that I got lost in.

He pulled back and just smiled.

I resettled down into my seat and silently acknowledged a point well made.

"Well Miss Lisa, ready to begin your life of crime?"

Heck, why not, I thought impulsively. I reached forward and got my sunglasses off the dash, put them on and then met his matching polarized stare.

His mouth was twitching a little and broke out into a full fledged grin as I said, "Put it in gear!"

We were on the edge of the city when my convictions got the best of me, "You're not really involved in criminal activity are you?"

He looked over at me with a smile, "That would be a matter of perspective, now wouldn't it? I can tell you that we are highly regulated," he finished in mock seriousness.

"Regulated by whom?" I asked skeptically.

"Why, by our own strong moral consciences."

"Yeah, right!" I looked away out into the passing scenery, smiling.

Several hours later, Flint made an abrupt exit off the freeway and onto a more rural looking road.

I sat up and looked around with concern. "Why did you get off here?"

"It's Sunday." He said the day of the week like that answered something.

I glanced at the clock. It read 10:25 and I glanced back up at him. He wasn't seriously going to... here?

He pulled into the crowded parking lot of a church.

He took his glasses off and glanced over at me, as I stammered out, "But I'm Catholic!"

He snorted, "Exactly!"

He got out, opened my door and waited expectantly for me. Hesitantly I got out. "But I'm not dressed to go to a church!" I protested as he took my arm.

"You'll find out that protestant churches for the most part don't mind what you're dressed like so

much as that you come regularly.”

“Protestant!” I whined.

Couldn’t he have taken me to something at least Orthodox. I was pretty sure this was a sin of some sort.

“Evangelical to be exact.”

I groaned out loud.

“Flint, this is against my beliefs!”

He stopped and regarded me seriously. His fingers reached out, pulled the golden cross out of my shirt from where it had been nestled against my chest and fingered it for a moment.

His words were full of intense meaning and I felt them rock me to the core, “This is a very pretty necklace, which I realize has a lot of special meaning to you. But do you know that some of the very worst villains that I’ve ever encountered in my life wore crosses around their necks just like you and thought they were justified to receive an eternal reward because of it, regardless of the atrocities they committed daily? This necklace and the rituals that go with it aren’t going to save you from anything, Lisa. It’s not enough to believe that Jesus merely existed once and that by acts of service in His name you gain eternal favor. You need a relationship with your Savior. Your faith is not justified by your works, but rather your works should bear testimony to your faith, which you should be actively pursuing in relationship with God every day and not in the recitation of litanies to saints that have taken the role of false deities. Now everyone’s been given a choice to make in life Lisa, so you can stay out here and continue to believe that the proof of your faith lies around your neck and in the prayers you recite; or you can come with me and start learning that your Savior is a far more personable, Infinite Being than the symbology of someone forever nailed to a cross with no further interest in your daily walk other than to remind you of how much He once suffered for you. What’s it going to be?”

I felt a tear slip down my face. Why was everything being taken from me?

I fingered the gold cross that he had released. Truthfully, I wore the necklace more out of a desired connection with my mother than I did out of any vestige of faith.

My faith was remarkably empty and all my life I had admittedly relied on others to tell me what faith should be about. I hadn’t really questioned it because it was comfortable to stay where I was, as well as leave the connection with my past unbroken. The lack of emotion behind my motives for faith was why I hadn’t been to a mass or confession in years.

I let go of the necklace and it fell heavily against my skin. I looked up at Flint and then past him to the church. I loved the man and in some ways I think he knew it already. So why would he endanger our relationship over a matter of faith....unless it was because.... I glanced deeply into his warm eyes. Unless it was because he loved me and wanted what was best for me, eternally, over any value he placed in the physical relationship that I knew he wanted with me. I swallowed as more tears fell.

I could trust him more, because of that sacrificial statement for my well being, than perhaps for any other reason he had shown me up until now.

He was so sure in his faith. I could see it in his eyes, which formed the windows of his soul.

I didn’t even know where to begin to defend my faith, which caused me to acknowledge that I hadn’t really had much of a faith after all, just a belief passed on to me.

I reached up and undid the necklace. His hand opened and I dropped the necklace into it and nothing more was said.

He took my hand, his fingers curling warmly around mine, as we continued on toward the church. I was scared, but inside I felt like I was doing the right thing, as if perhaps I was experiencing faith for the first time in my life.

Beyond a doubt, somehow I sensed I wasn’t going to be disappointed by my decision. There would be those who would think I had betrayed my faith, but the need for faith was why I had started out on a journey of faith, with a man who cared enough not to keep the challenges and rewards of faith

from me, in order to preserve his own interests.

We were nearing the front entryway when he said, "I believe now would be a good time to practice our false identities."

He handed me a driver's license with my picture on it. "Lisa Kilroy. Who are you?" I asked.

"Why, I'm Mr. Kilroy, your husband."

"What?" I asked flabbergasted.

Before I could object he slid two rings onto my finger. I gasped at the sight of them.

"Some guys like the one, big, single diamond approach, but as for me I like the look of lots of smaller ones. It's more sparkly. What do you think?" he asked.

I stared at the sparkling rings, "They're real?" I whispered.

"Of course they are! I don't buy fake gemstones, especially not for my wife!" he responded in mock affront.

I looked up at him, "Married?" I said, still not believing he would pick such a cover.

"Yes, married! You don't want these good people to think we're living the life of sin, now do you?"

There was no time for questions, as we were being greeted at the doors. I smiled wanly and then more or less felt myself dragged inside.

My face hurt from smiling. Everything was radically different, but I had to admit the message was rather theme appropriate, to the point that it seemed tailor made. I almost felt guilty for everyone else in the church having to sit through a sermon that seemed so obviously just meant for me.

It opened my eyes a lot. Some part of me still couldn't believe he had stopped to go to church. Flint, in so many ways, just seemed so cool and it was kind of exciting to know that such a man could be a man of faith too.

It was yet another interesting tidbit of information about the man that I had fallen in love with. Not only had he stopped to go to church, but he was busy in the work of bringing me into a meaningful and redemptive salvation.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked softly into my ear.

"I'm glad I came in. I'm glad you care enough about me to share this with me," I said, looking up to meet his eyes, still feeling crushed inside by the understanding of what I didn't know about faith.

"I care very much for you Lisa."

He slipped my mother's necklace into my hand and I looked up at him in question.

"You know where you need to go in search of answers now, which is directly to God through Jesus, so I don't think there's any harm in you having something that's more about your mother than anything else."

My fingers closed over the treasured relic of my mother's and I leaned my head down onto Flint's shoulder. I'd already received far more than I'd lost by making this step to experience God more fully and find out where I fit into His plan for my life.

"You okay?"

I nodded, "I have so much to learn. I don't know how to overcome the fear of all that I suddenly don't know."

His hand reclaimed mine, but he didn't say anything.

I looked up at him curiously, "Don't you have a comeback for that?"

He shook his head, "I don't have the answers to everything; but through reading the Good Book, and through prayer to help you come to all the correct answers you'll get from reading it, I know that you'll find all your questions answered plus some."

He leaned forward and pulled a Bible free from the pew in front of us and laid it in my lap.

"It's as simple as that?" I asked, staring down at the Bible.

"As simple as that," he affirmed.

They took the offering at the end and I wasn't surprised to see Flint pull out a folded up check and drop it in. Maybe I was being a bit snoopy, as I craned my head a little to see the amount on the check, but I was curious. I did a double take.

The check was in the six figures!

I turned to Flint, stunned. He noticed and said softly, "It's not polite to snoop."

Two could play that game. "I'm your wife!"

"Touché," he admitted. After a moment he leaned over and whispered into my ear, "I got a little behind on my tithing, that's all."

He expected me to believe that!

We left and I thought about it. If he was a devoted enough person to stop and give so much money to a worthy cause, why then did I assume he was lying to me? As far as I knew he hadn't ever lied to me. Why did I doubt him?

We stopped at a quaint little restaurant and I more or less played with my food, as I debated within myself.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I looked up at him, "Were you really telling me the truth about that check? You really tithed \$172,000?"

He nodded, "I've been so busy that it's been a couple of months since I've had a chance to catch a sermon. I have charities and causes that I give to as well, but all my tithe goes to the church."

I stared down at the table in frustration. "I don't understand. You're a wealthy man and you're going after the treasure just like the rest of them. My father has hundreds of millions of dollars, perhaps even billions, and he's after it like you are. Why do you need the treasure? Why?" I asked imploringly.

"I don't," he answered simply.

"Then why?"

"Because others are looking for it."

I studied him closely, "Are you saying that if nobody was looking for it then you wouldn't be either?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

He studied me for a moment and then sighed, as if giving up on something. "Such a treasure, if it's what it's fabled to be, wouldn't be a good thing in anybody's hands."

"Then why are you..." I stopped, in stunned realization. "You don't want the treasure, you want to destroy it!"

"Correct, but to do that, first I have to find it."

I looked down at the table, "But I don't want the treasure destroyed. It could do a lot of good things," I said softly.

His fingers tilted my chin up. "No doubt you would use it for good, but do you really think the world would let you keep it, only to give it away?"

"I could hire someone, someone like you."

Flint looked down ruefully. "I appreciate your vote of confidence honey, but there are limits as to what I and those I work with can do. This whole thing has gotten out of hand. Every player in the world is making a play at this one and given how many resources have been thrown into finding the treasure, one or several of them are eventually going to find it. And they aren't going to let either you or me stand in their way of getting a blank check to solve all of their fiscal worries."

He was probably right. It wasn't just the treasure that I didn't want destroyed; I could actually live with the destruction of the treasure. What I most of all didn't want to see was the proud remnants of my people destroyed and gone forever. I had been hoping one day to build a museum with the treasure so the world could see.

“I’m not ready to see it all destroyed. I respect you for what you want to do and I know you were hoping I would help you. But I’m sorry, I can’t.”

He nodded understandably. “Oh well,” was all he said as he went on eating.

“I’m really not going to tell you.”

“I got the message; now eat your food before it gets cold.”

“You’re not mad at me?” I asked.

“Why would I be mad at you? You’re only trying to protect your heritage. I can understand that.”

“You’re still going to take me with you?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Yes, but if you don’t start eating your food I’m going to sit you on my lap and force feed you myself.”

Later that evening we reached the airport and I was surprised to learn that we weren’t taking a main airline. Flint had a private jet and, other than the pilots, we were the only passengers.

I sank into the leather upholstery. It was luxuriously comfortable but I was tired of sitting and slightly nervous about what lay ahead. Okay, I was a lot nervous.

Flint crashed down into the seat beside me and started reclining the seat all the way back, folding up the armrests on my seat and his at the same time, which was annoying since I had been using mine.

“You know these seats recline all the way,” he said.

“I’m aware of that!” I snapped out, moodily.

My seat started going backward and I clenched my jaw as my seat came level with his. “You need to relax; it’s a long flight to Barcelona.”

“I don’t like flying!”

“Hey, hey, simmer down; I have just the distraction you need.”

“And what’s that?” I asked tersely, turning to look at him.

“Me!” he declared, as he pulled me over onto his seat and started kissing me.

Dimly something registered to me, as if from a long way away. I broke contact and glanced around the cab of the plane, “We’re moving!”

“Give the girl a cupid doll!”

“I’m serious! Shouldn’t we put on our seatbelts or something?”

He pulled me back down, and said “You worry too much,” and started kissing me all over again.

Chapter Twelve

Dark Water

I blinked my eyes open and immediately squinted them against the glare of the sun coming through the portal window. My eyes refocused enough to see that I was lying beside Flint half draped over him. Blushing, I scrambled back and awkwardly got to my feet.

“Was I sleeping on you like that all night?”

He sat up smiling and, obviously, the answer was that I had been.

I brushed my hair to the sides of my face overcome by how hedonistic I seemed to have suddenly become, “I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be. I rather enjoyed it,” he said, getting up.

I moved to step back, but he kissed me first. He was always kissing me, it seemed. Not that I minded it all that much.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I mumbled back in reply.

“We’ll be landing in an hour so you might want to freshen up.”

I nodded and went to the rear of the plane.

Customs was a hassle; which was the best way of putting it. I thought we were through when a short little man rushed forward.

“Señor James, what a pleasure to see that you have come to visit us again! Tell me, who is the lovely lady?”

“Enrique, may I have the honor of introducing Mrs. Kilroy to you,” Flint said with a flourish. I smiled warmly on cue as the little man went into double time in his never ending spiel of best wishes, my overwhelming beauty, how lucky Flint, whom he called James, was and how lucky I was.

Flint cut into the ever expanding monologue, “Enrique, since this is my wife’s first time to your beautiful country, I wonder if you could help us expedite the process of getting her paper work done?”

“Oh, but of course! It is but the least I can do for an old friend. Come this way, Señora Kilroy.”

I followed the little man, as he led us to a separate booth and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers.

“I just need your signature, Señora, on these papers and you’re free to go enjoy all that our fair country has to offer with your new husband.”

I looked at the pile of papers and leafed through a few. They were all in Spanish. I glanced at Flint seeking help, and he nodded that it was okay, so I started signing my life away. For all I knew, I could be signing my confession to a murder.

With that done, we moved out and into the city. I had a strange feeling of being watched and glanced back. Yeah, we were being followed.

I glanced at Flint and he nodded.

“Yeah, I know, sightseeing is gonna have to wait, honey. I’ll bring you back someday, I promise. Hold onto my hand.”

For the next hour I learned how to lose a tail from a professional. I thought we had lost them when a bullet pinged off a building just above our heads. We crouched down together, making our way along the lines of what available cover we had.

"I thought we lost them!" I said, slightly out of breath, as I tried to keep up with him.

"We did! This is somebody else," he replied tersely.

A man stepped out of an alcove ahead of us with an assault rifle and, instead of shooting him, Flint threw his handgun, which clocked the guy senseless. Flint retrieved his gun and tossed the man's rifle into some piles of trash.

The man started to stir and Flint kicked him viciously in the head. The man was out cold. I was seeing a different side of Flint than I had ever seen before, but had suspected was there. He had a savage side, but then, so did I.

A radio on the man's side started crackling with foreign voices. Something similar to German, I thought. Flint picked up the radio and listened.

The voices ended as somebody appeared to be asking a question. There was silence and then the question was repeated.

Gruffing his tone somewhat, Flint responded in the language perfectly and then broke into a staged, excited monologue that had voices coming back to him over the radio excitedly. He said something more and then dropped the radio and pulled me along after him to where the side alley opened into a busy market street.

Several white guys suddenly appeared, all running down the street past us, pushing their way through the crowd. Flint waited a moment and then pulled me along after him, in the opposite direction the men had taken. Flint must have led them off the trail, with whatever he had said.

We split across several busy streets, got honked at by cars and roundly cursed as well. It would have been quite exciting if it wasn't for the fear of a bullet with my name on it crashing into the back of my skull.

We ended up on a less busy street and Flint stopped at a pay phone and started calling someone.

"Who were those guys? What were they speaking?" I asked.

"Swiss," he responded.

"Swiss!" I exclaimed. "Why would they be after the treasure?"

He gave me a look that said I wasn't having an especially bright day and I wondered what I had missed.

"I suppose you're one of those individuals who thinks that the Swiss banks, out of innocent and honest intentions, held onto vaults full of Nazi treasure, which was mostly stolen from Jews, until well after World War II was over. Imagine a major banking center such as Switzerland with its own version of Midas's touch. What kind of global control do you think they could exert?"

Now that he put it in that way, it made a lot more sense why the Swiss of all people might be involved in the treasure hunt.

If they were involved, who else was?

I listened to Flint on the phone.

"Frank, it's Flint. I'm calling in that favor you owe me. What kinds of assets do you have in Barcelona?"

He stood there for a few moments listening.

"I appreciate this Frank! Could you go ahead and call the port authority so no suspicions are raised?"

More listening and then Flint said, "Thanks old friend," and hung up the phone.

He started off down the street at a fast clip and I hurried to catch up, "Where are we going?"

"The harbor," was all he said.

It took us three hours to get there, when it should have only taken an hour. We had to double back and go out of our way several times to avoid search patrols.

The whole city seemed to be alive with people searching for us. I would never have made it through such a man-hunt alone, and have remained free, using only my limited evasion skills. Flint,

however, was a master at it and he helped me keep my cool and not panic.

We reached the wharf and then made our way along the marina. The docked boats changed from old fishing trawlers, which looked like they would sink in a weak eddy, to more expensive looking yachts.

Near the entrance of a private marina, Flint stopped. There was heavy security and we weren't going to be able to slip past them without being noticed.

Flint was looking farther out in the harbor, his eyes squinted in concentration.

He pointed at a yacht far offshore by itself, "That's it. That's the *Siren's Call*. We'll have to swim out to it."

I stepped back from the dark water of the harbor unconsciously. "Couldn't we use a small boat to get to it?"

He turned to me and something in my face must have alerted him to the apprehension I felt for the dark water of the bay.

"Didn't you swim all the way from your father's island to shore? I know you can swim," he said, cautiously feeling me out.

"It was a bad experience! I nearly died and it was night, everything was dark! The water was dark and something brushed past me and I thought I was going to be eaten! Just like my mother!"

Flint's strong arms came around me and held me against his chest. His words came softly, right beside my ear.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you, I promise!"

I drew back slightly and he said, "I'm especially not going to let a sea monster get you!"

"How can you promise that?" I asked, a little hysterically, as he stepped back from me, kicked his shoes off and slipped over the side into the dark waters of the harbor.

He held a hand up to me and said, "I won't let anything happen to you Lisa, but we have to make this swim. I won't leave you alone out there."

My fingers clenched into fists, but I kicked my shoes off and slipped into the water beside him. I don't know why, but ever since this man had come into my life I had been made to face each and every one of my worst fears.

I really wished that cycle would stop!

Being in this dark water was bad, but Flint was there helping me in the midst of my nightmare. He always seemed to be doing that. What would I ever do without him?

We started off. I didn't really focus on how far the distant yacht was from us. I only looked to see where Flint was. As long as I could see him splashing along beside me I was okay, or at least functional.

Fear closed around me like an icy prison, and as time wore on I could feel its grip on me, draining me of all my energy. Panic started to settle in.

I wasn't going to make it!

Dimly, I heard shouting. I glanced at Flint to see him gesture ahead and I glanced there, too. The yacht was close. I could make it a little farther, I thought. We bumped into the side of the yacht and then Flint was gone.

I was alone and, in the panic of that thought, my body locked up and I began to sink. Strong hands grabbed hold of me and I was jerked up out of the water to the deck of the yacht, water streaming off me.

I was so cold!

My teeth were chattering so hard I thought they would rattle out of my head. Flint swung me up into his arms and I latched onto his shirt front like he was a life preserver, which in a way he had become for me.

Suddenly, he put me down and hot water began to course down my back. It shocked me so much that I half screamed and latched tighter onto Flint.

“Sshh, it’s just hot water. It’s a shower.”

I looked around and saw the shower stall for myself. In complete embarrassment, I started to cry.

“I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!” I mumbled out over and over through my tears, keeping my head ducked down against his chest.

“Whoa! Whoa! Time out!”

He pulled my chin up to stare into my face with concerned eyes, “What are you apologizing for, honey?”

“I’m always crying around you! I almost never cried before you came along and now I’m just a bucket of tears all the time! You must think I’m the weakest, most emotional woman you’ve ever met!”

I tried to duck my head back down again, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Lisa, you are perhaps the bravest and most courageous woman I have ever met!”

“Yeah right!”

“I’m serious! How many women, cursed with the hellish upbringing that you were stuck with, could make such a success out of themselves. With nothing to your name and no support, you made yourself into one NY’s finest detectives. And you haven’t let the journey up from the bottom corrupt you, either. You’re an honorable, decent and courageous young woman. And, as far as crying goes, tears don’t make you weak. Maybe the reason why you haven’t cried much before in your life is because you haven’t felt safe enough to let go. You’re safe with me and I think you know it. Do I look like I mind you blubbering all over me? Heck no! It just gives me another excuse to hold your awesome body.”

I couldn’t help the little spurt of laughter that erupted.

He cocked his head to the side, “You laugh, but it’s darn hard to let go of you girl!”

Humor faded from me and was replaced with seriousness, “When this is all over, what’s going to happen between you and me?”

His gaze also turned serious, “Have you ever been fishing?”

My eyebrows quirked up, “What kind of question is that?”

“I’m serious! Have you ever been fishing?”

“Yes,” I said, not knowing where this was leading.

“Did you keep the fish?”

I’d only been fishing once, with a group of college friends. My brow wrinkled at the memory, “No, they made me throw it back into the pond. I really wanted to eat that fish, too!”

“I feel the same way you do about fishing. You and I are kind of like that. I found you, I caught you and I’m never letting you go!”

“You really mean that?” I whispered breathlessly.

“I do. Now finish your shower, sexy little fish, while I get us away from this city before our continued health and happiness are threatened any further.”

He stepped back out of the shower and reluctantly I watched him go. I felt all warm and gooey inside and it had nothing to do with the warm water pounding on my back.

I stripped off my sodden clothes and finished my shower, grateful to wash the filth of the harbor away. I stepped out and dried off with some nearby towels. Now for some clothes.

This didn’t look like the main cabin so I might be out of luck. I checked the drawers first. Nothing. I went to a small armoire and opened it.

“Oh my!”

Before me was quite the array of lingerie, everything from not so modest to downright bare.

“Are you serious?” I exclaimed.

The only clothes for women onboard the ship was this collection?

Exactly what kind of man was this friend of Flint’s?

I invaded the room across from mine to find it fully stocked with men’s clothing. I got a shirt and a

pair of pants, which I had to hold up with a belt.

I made my way topside in time to see the harbor fading away behind us. I found Flint at the helm and his eyebrows quirked up at the sight of my baggy attire.

I answered the unasked question of why; “Apparently your friend prefers his lady friends to prance around his ship in nothing except what’s acceptable in a stripper joint.”

Flint shook his head wryly, “Yeah, that about describes Frank.”

“Your friend literally just lets you borrow a several million dollar yacht when you call him up and ask him for it?”

“How much is a life worth? I’ve saved his on several occasions and gave him a tip once that paid off in the purchase of several yachts larger than this one, if he wanted to upgrade.”

“Still, how are you going to return it?”

“I won’t be. If your moral fibers are rising indignantly about it, I’ll see that he gets another one.”

I studied him for a long moment, “Just how rich are you?”

“Enough,” he responded with a half smile.

“Where are we going?”

“Morocco. If all goes to plan, I’ll pick up a plane there from an acquaintance.”

“Another largess borrow?” I quipped.

“No, this time I’m going to steal what I need and you’re going to help me.”

My jaw fell open.

“If it makes you feel any better, stealing the plane will cut down on the drug trafficking for a few days.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ready for More

Two days went by in which we saw no one. On the third day, our destination began to appear and before long we were coming inland toward a small jetty where a drug runner lived, where I was supposed to help Flint steal a plane.

Moralities of justice were beginning to become skewed. Was it really so wrong to steal from a drug runner?

Surely that was a permissible sin, if there was such a thing. Wincing, I grimly doubted it.

Flint was walking toward me and he had a very sheepish look about him. I watched him curiously as he drew closer. Something was crumpled up in his fist and I knew what it was.

I had been waiting for this moment ever since I'd gotten on board. He looked very uncomfortable as he stood in front of me. He wouldn't even meet my eyes, which was very unlike him.

"We'll be there soon. These are pretty rough characters. They'll likely try to kill me just for sport, but when they see you they'll kill me just to have you. We have to kill or injure them first, if we plan to get out of here alive. They won't try to kill us right at first; Benito likes to talk too much for that. That will be our chance to take them out. The problem is that Benito will have one or two of his men off to the sides. I won't be able to take them out and still deal with those that are in front of us. I need you to take the out runners out of play."

I nodded.

He swallowed hard and continued, "To help us pull this off, a distraction could be useful. Now, just by yourself, normally dressed, you're a distraction, but..." He looked away like he didn't want to continue.

I reached out and took his hand and tugged on the fabric he held.

"It's all right, I'll do it," I said softly.

He looked back at me, "No, it's not! You're a lady and I don't like making you appear to be a slut!"

I stood up. "You know I'm a lady. That's all that matters."

I tugged again and he let go. I walked down below decks. Time to face yet another fear.

Barefoot, I walked back up the stairs and turned around the wheelhouse to face Flint. His face was a studied mask of control, but the beat of the pulse in his neck was doing triple time.

That rapid pulse gave me confidence and I smiled shyly, "I look pretty good, don't I honey?"

"You have to ask that?" he said thickly.

Feeling daring, I stepped up to him. Taking his hands, I placed them on my bare hips overtop the bikini bottom strings and stretched up until I was almost kissing him.

"Just remember, I'm a one man kind of woman."

Watching his eyes closely, I saw his irises pulse larger as I said, "Your woman." Then, I kissed him.

Drawing back, I waited to see what he would say as his eyes drifted over me. His eyes drifted back to mine and he nodded affirmatively, as if words were lost to him at the moment.

I liked that and I had to admit that I had never felt so positively about my body as I did in this moment. Add self confidence to the gifts that this man had given back to me.

As the yacht pulled up along the dock, I started out alongside Flint, my hip rubbing into him sensuously. His arm came out around my back to rest possessively on my right hip. Just like the picture the homeless man had drawn. Call it fate or something else, but it was really happening.

What the picture hadn't shown though was the 9mm that I held clutched in my hand under the back of Flint's shirt. Three men waited for us at the end of the small wharf, while two others were fanned out on adjoining wharfs' just like Flint had said.

The men truly did look rough and their eyes were all over me. I did my best to keep my smile in place, but it was like taking a bath in sewage water, the way they looked at me.

I could feel tension radiating out of Flint's back. A quick glance to either side showed both men, caught up in their fascination of me. They weren't even holding their semi automatic rifles with both hands.

We came to a stop and the one I took for Benito started talking to Flint as his eyes were still firmly focused on me.

"My friend I owe you a hundred thousand ransoms for bringing this succulent delicacy..."

Okay, I'd heard enough. I brought the 9mm out and put one in the guy to the left, pivoted on my foot and put one in the guy to the right. I swung back around to behold Benito and his two counterparts standing in slack jawed shock.

Feeling especially capricious, considering that these men, with the first words out of their mouth, had been plotting to rape me for their own mutual enjoyment, I put a shell in each of their right knees.

They fell to the ground howling and clutching at their knees, all thoughts of lustful conquest fading from their pain ridden thoughts.

I glanced at Flint, "I'm going to check the house and see if there's anything that will pass off as better feminine attire."

"Baby, you couldn't look more feminine right now if you tried!" Flint said sincerely.

I smiled at the compliment and headed off toward the house at the end of the wharf anyway.

I had been successful in gathering several more serviceable items of clothing. I now sat in the copilot's seat nervously, as Flint took the pontoon plane out into the open water and started opening it up to a higher velocity.

Apparently he could also fly, at least that was what he had told me. He seemed to know what all the buttons were for anyway.

Oh, I hoped he was telling me the truth!

I clutched hard at the seat as, with a series of rough bumps, the little sea plane skipped into the air. After several minutes of flying, I focused on letting go of the seat and arm rests a finger at a time.

Flint looked over consolingly, "I'm sorry I can't kiss you through this one, my hands are tied so to speak."

I smiled wanly, as I scanned over our route, "So where are we heading now?"

"Mali," was his simple answer.

My eyebrows rose slightly. How much did he know?

"Well, am I getting warm?" he asked with a smile.

"I told you, I'm not interested in seeing the treasure destroyed; you're on your own," I responded, with a mysterious smile of my own.

"Well, would you like to hear my theory anyway?" he asked with a hopeful tint to his voice.

I smiled more broadly; he never gave up. I liked that about him. "Sure, why not? I'll listen to your theory, but I'm not giving you any helpful hints," I said.

"Fair enough. Okay, so our story starts a long time ago, just after the great flood to be exact, when the descendants of Noah's sons began to move back into the greater world from the Middle East,

where they went their own separate ways. Ham's descendants settled prominently down into Africa. Several mighty kingdoms emerged early on, the most well known of which are the Egyptians, but much less known was another powerful kingdom further south and to the east, the kingdom of Kush, which is now modern day Ethiopia, Sudan and parts of some other countries. They were powerful and their warriors were renowned throughout the world. They were mostly left to their own, as few could challenge them. Now, here is where it gets interesting. In the biblical days of Solomon, he received gold from the land of Ophir, a lot of gold, and it was regarded as a steady source. No one is quite sure where Ophir was, but it was long theorized that it was in reference to the kingdom of Kush. The problem with that is that while there is gold in that area, there's not the kind of gold in the abundance mentioned in the Bible. Another interesting item of that time was the mysterious Queen of Sheba. She came from the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, aptly named the land of Ceba. She too had a lot of gold and other treasures, which she gave to Solomon in abundance, when she saw the truth of his wisdom for herself. More importantly, there is evidence of some connection between her land of Ceba and the kingdom of Kush. We know that they traded with each other across the Red Sea quite extensively. In fact, it's possible that they were of the same blood and that the land of Ceba was but a satellite outpost of the greater Kush Empire. Now, the Queen of Sheba and Solomon allegedly became lovers and had a son, whose name was Menelik. The Queen did not stay with Solomon, but returned to her own land. There is some evidence that Solomon saw Menelik at least once later on in his life. It's rumored that Menelik's appearance was so similar to Solomon's father, King David, that Solomon had him renamed David, after his father. Menelik is rumored to have returned to Jerusalem near the end of Solomon's reign. On a side note, it's rumored that he took the Ark of the Covenant with him from Jerusalem, along with a contingent of Levite priests. Although not overly important to the treasure I'm looking for, what is significant about Menelik taking the ark of God is that he didn't return to Ceba, he went to Kush. Little else is known of Menelik after that, but he was the son of one of the most notable kings ever to walk the earth, as well as the son of a likewise notable Queen. He was of royal birth, in spades, so to speak. I think he ruled Kush after that, but little is known to support that. Now Solomon dies and the sovereignty of Israel is split. Judah is alone with Benjamin in the south, while the ten northern tribes do their own thing. Time goes by and the northern tribes start getting hammered hard by their neighbors for their disobedience to God. The Assyrians complete the downfall of northern Israel and carry them all away into captivity, while Judah persists on for a while. During this time the kingdom of Kush hadn't gone away, they're still a powerful force to be reckoned with. Now we have to go back in time slightly, before the ten northern tribes were taken captive, in particular the tribe of Dan. Dan was one of the largest of the tribes of Israel, but they weren't able to conquer their allotment of the promised land, so they were forced to settle northward from their originally chosen spot. They settled along the coast just below Tyre and Sidon, the main capital cities of the Phoenician trade empire. There is strong Biblical evidence to suggest that the tribe of Dan picked up on seafaring from the Phoenicians and started settling elsewhere before the northern tribes were taken into captivity. They are said to have landed on Cyprus and modern day Turkey. The remnants of their landward people, who were taken into captivity by the Assyrians, are said to have eventually migrated northward with the remnants of several other tribes and ultimately they made their way out over northern Europe. But Dan also went somewhere else. Remnants of their tribe, along with the tribe of Naphtali and several others, either fled south from the captivity or had already migrated earlier to the land of Kush."

"What does all this Jewish history have to do with the treasure you're hunting?" I asked, looking out the window of the plane at the barren desert over which we were passing.

"It has everything to do with it, and you, by the way," he rejoined.

I didn't look at him for fear I would reveal something in my face. I realized that not looking at him was a tell all of its own, but I couldn't help it. What else did he know?

"Care to explain that?" I asked the question more softly than I had wanted it to sound.

“I believe that the kingdom of Kush had a very heavy influence of both Jewish customs and blood lines. They remained paganistic as a nation, but I believe there were those there also practicing Judaism. I say this for several reasons, but I’ll narrow it down to just three. Menelik possibly ruled there and he was half Jewish. Several remnant tribes of Israel are known to have settled there after the captivity. The last reason is from the Bible, but a lot farther into the future, somewhere in the area of 30 AD or so. Phillip, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, is told by an angel of the Lord to go along the desert road toward Gaza in Acts 8:26-40. He meets a man, an Ethiopian eunuch of great standing. He is in charge of all the treasures of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, aka Kush. Phillip is told by the Spirit to go stand by the eunuch’s chariot. The eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah and didn’t understand a certain passage, in particular, that foretold of the coming of Jesus. Phillip shares the news of Jesus with him and the man is saved and baptized that same day. The eunuch departs home satisfied and Phillip is transported to Azotus by the Spirit of God. Now there are a couple of things to take away from this interesting tidbit of scriptural reference. Kush, long after the fall of Israel’s prominence, is still a powerful nation. At this time, after Jesus resurrection and ascension into heaven, the good news of the gospel had not yet been made freely available to the gentiles. Peter doesn’t have his vision of the gospel being preached to the world of the gentiles until two chapters later in Acts, when he’s summoned by Cornelius the centurion. Why then would this eunuch be studying the Old Testament, and why would Phillip be sent to explain the scripture to someone who wasn’t Jewish? I believe that the best explanation is that this powerful eunuch, in charge of the treasury of Ethiopia, was in fact Jewish, a descendant of the refugees of the twelve tribes of Israel. The man had an important, powerful position in the land of Kush. It stands to reason, I think, that there was a very powerful Jewish influence there, dating all the way back to the days of Solomon and perhaps even before him. Who then is this great Candace of Ethiopia that the eunuch serves? The answer to that is that there have been many Candace’s of the Empire of Kush throughout time. Candace is not a personal name, it’s a title. It means ‘glowing’ or ‘glowing bright’ and was the term given to all the queens of the Kingdom of Kush, also known as Nubia and Ethiopia. The people of Kush put a spin on the traditional headship of their peoples. They had both kings and queens, but the queen was the ultimate authority and not the king. The queens were so powerful that they could request the king to kill himself and he, by matter of tradition, had to do so. The queens were known to the people simply as Candace and the last name of their origin, which was how they were distinguished from each other. These queens were known for both their wisdom and their skill in battle. In 325 BC, the Candace of Meroe marshaled her armies and arrayed them at the northern border of her land as Alexander the Great, having finished with his conquest of Egypt and, hearing of the fabled wealth of Kush, marched with his army toward the fabled land. Upon seeing the vast number of Kush warriors and the Candace’s skillful placement of them, Alexander turned back for fear of what would be said if he were to lose to a female general. Later, another Candace invaded Roman held territory and defeated several Roman legions in open battle. The list of the accomplishments of the many Candace’s could go on and on. Eventually, through the ravages of time, most of the ancient kingdoms of Africa fell to European imperialism or internal strife of their own making. The grandeur of Kush disappeared and now little is known of it. I thought I’d reached a dead end in finding the treasure of Kush. Then I heard of a small, cult-like group that kept a low profile, but that seemed to have tremendous impact in concern to societal matters in the region. They were said to be ruled by a female, who went by the title of Candace, and was respected as such. It was very hard to find anything on them, as they were so secretive. Then I found out from a source that there was no current ruling Candace. The last Candace lived to an astonishing one hundred and fifty-two years. She was forced into a marriage not to her liking as a young woman. Her husband did many evil things and, out of fear that he would reveal the secret of the treasures of Kush, she asked him to kill himself. He refused, lacking the honor of the tradition that dated back far into the history of the Candace’s. She killed him herself when he refused. They’d had one son together and in time it became apparent that

the son took after his father in almost every way and excess. He, in fear of his mother, nearly succeeded in killing her. But she survived and had him hunted down instead. He had only one surviving daughter, that he had never known. The Candace adopted her and raised her as her own. The girl didn't want any part of the responsibility of her ancestral duty though and ran away to the city. She met a businessman and fell in love, but it was a one sided affair. Her businessman lover knew of her ancestry and all he wanted from her was the wealth of the ancient Kushites. He imprisoned her and beat her in order to force her to tell him what she knew, and where the old Candace could be found. She refused, somehow managed to trick a guard, and escaped. Alone and pregnant, she walked over two hundred miles back to where the old Candace lived in secretive isolation. She died giving birth to twin boys. The boys, for a time, lived with the Candace and then they left. Their father found them and tried to enlist them to help him get the treasure, but the boys wanted it for themselves and they tortured and killed their father together. The Candace had them both exiled, with the knowledge that the dynasty was to die with her. Then, something happened. A daughter of one of the two brothers killed one brother in retribution for her mother's death by his hands. It was unclear what would happen to the girl, but the Candace stepped in and demanded that the girl be brought to her to train as the next Candace. Her father agreed to it, but only on the condition that the girl be told all the secrets of the past, to which the Candace agreed. The girl lived with the Candace for two years from the time that she was twelve until she was fourteen. Then the girl left and went back to her father's home and the old Candace was never seen again. The girl's father, anxious to finally learn the secrets of the past for himself, pressured his daughter to tell him what she knew. She refused over and over. He choked her one night, to the point of unconsciousness, and told her that, if she didn't tell him what he wanted, he'd rape her himself in the morning. She was sixteen. While with the Candace, she had learned a few ways to defend herself and she over-powered her security detail in the night and slipped out of the house undetected, by climbing down three floors on the outside of the house. She then swam through several miles of open sea water to the mainland. She was never heard from again and was presumed dead until, eleven years later, she turned up as a successful and highly respected homicide detective working for the NYPD. Lisa Tauranto, you are the last Candace of the Kingdom of Kush."

His eyes were gentle, but firm, as he finished his perfect delineation of just who I was. My hands shook and twisted together in my lap.

He'd known all along who I was!

He knew too much!

Why did it have to be like this?

"I....." his hand was tugging on my arm, interrupting me, and I looked up with pain filled eyes to meet his honest gaze.

"I didn't play you! I've been nothing but honest with you from the beginning. I didn't want you to become involved in this, but fate intervened. I suspected it was you, as you matched the description I had, which your father later confirmed. If your father hadn't started hacking people up, I doubt I would have ever crossed paths with you. I was content to leave you alone Lisa. You have to believe me!"

And somehow, I did believe him.

"Now, unbuckle that seatbelt and scoot over here."

My fingers, seemingly of a mind all their own, unbuckled the harness and he more or less pulled me to his side and folded an arm around me securely.

I pressed my face to his shoulder liking his smell. Once again, he was security and a calm place in the storm of my life.

"If I were true to the traditions of my past I should kill you right now, as I have very little doubt now that you won't find the treasure," I said, softly against his neck.

I watched as he pulled a knife out from somewhere and offered it to me, handle first. I pushed it

away and he chuckled, kissing the top of my head.

“Does this mean that you have caved into my magnetic charm and are now as malleable as clay in my fingers?” he said in a Machiavellian tone.

I smiled, “Not quite. I’m still not telling you what I know.”

His fingers squeezed my shoulder, “And I’ll never ask you to.”

For a while there was silence in the companionable atmosphere of the plane.

“You didn’t finish your story. Where do you think the treasure is?” I asked, curious to know what he knew.

“Ahh, the curious little bird wants to know everything. Better put, I know where the treasure came from, but I’m less sure of where it is. To find the source of the treasure you have to go back to Solomon again and the treasure convoy that he received. Now, as I said before, there isn’t a source of gold in the Ethiopian area capable of producing the kind of wealth talked about in Solomon’s time, where silver was considered worthless because gold was so plentiful. So I thought, where else could such a limitless supply of gold have come from? The most likely place was West Africa, which is known as the gold coast. The gold is mostly alluvial, so it would have been easily mined. Mali, where we’re heading right now is situated on the Congo River and was the epicenter of this rich trade in the old days. Back then, present day Mali was known as Ghana. There was a caravan trail known as the ‘Gold and Salt Road’ that led up through the Sahara toward lower Egypt, aka Kush. I’m positive that this caravan’s trail, as well as maritime trade via the Phoenicians and possibly the tribe of Dan, was where the wealth of both Solomon and the kingdom of Kush originated. Now, to help back up the theory that the Hebrews knew where their gold was coming from, a man by the name of Za Alayaman founded the Za dynasty in Ghana. The dynasty had many kings, but what’s fascinating is that they claimed to be of Hebrew origin. The members of this Za dynasty claimed to be descendants from the tribe of Dan, and they kept up this lucrative caravan trade route of gold and salt long after Solomon was gone. As to the origin of these Danites coming to Ghana, they said that they came from the Lower Egypt area, which was the Kingdom of Kush. This goes to show that there was a heavy Jewish influence in that kingdom. This dynasty stretched out for a very long time until, in 1050 AD, the fifteenth king, Za Kusoy, converted to Islam, mostly out of a need to ensure the security of the lucrative trade routes as the lands north and south of the Sahara had come under Islamic control. Now, I don’t think the treasure is in modern day Mali, but what I’m hoping for is to find clues as to the actual trade route and possibly the destination points in Kush that will help me track down the flow of gold. I think the treasure is in Ethiopia or near it, but I’m not sure where, which puts me at a decided disadvantage with your father and anyone with whom he might team up.”

Flint fell silent and I straightened up a little, but I kept his arm around me, liking the secure weight of it. I turned my head to see him studying me deeply and I flushed a little at the intentness of his look.

“Could you please answer one question of mine?” he asked softly and I didn’t say no, so he took that as a yes.

“Do you really have the Queen of Sheba’s blood in you?”

I stared into his eyes, seeing the genuineness of his question on a deeply personal level. I nodded and breathed out, “Yes.”

“Seeing you explains why Solomon went so nuts over her. You’re so beautiful! I think you only improved on her good image.”

A little embarrassed, I ducked my head down. “I wouldn’t say that,” I mumbled softly.

“I would!” he said, just before he pulled my head back up to kiss me. Drawing back after a while he husked out, “I wish the Earth would just open up and swallow this treasure of yours so we could just move on past this!”

“Why don’t you just give this quest up? The treasure’s remained hidden for so long, it’s doubtful that it will ever be found. Just give up looking for it and let the other players in this game spend their time and money looking for it uselessly!”

"I can't!"

"Why?" I implored.

"Because of something that's come up," he said stubbornly.

I shook my head, "Flint, if you think my father is any closer to finding the treasure than anyone else who's looking for it, you're wrong! The treasure is safe! You don't have to worry about it. You can stop looking for it."

Flint shook his head no as his grip on the flight stick tightened.

I sat back angrily, "You can't or won't stop looking for it? Have you been lying to me? Are you really after it for yourself like everyone else?"

His head turned to me and I could see just how angry my words had made him, but I was angry too!

"Can't!" was all he bit out, as he looked away again.

"Why?" I asked, forcefully jerking his head back around to me.

"Because I love you!" he said explosively.

Stunned, I stared at him in a sort of dazed shock. Had he really just said that?

I knew he wanted me, even liked me, but love? Love meant so much more. Love meant commitment, babies, forever!

He must have read my look of surprise wrong, because he continued on angrily and his next words proved that he loved me.

"This treasure isn't measured in millions or even billions! It's in the high trillions, perhaps more! What do you think will happen when any of the players involved find out the significance of the part you play in finding the treasure? They will torture you in ways you have never imagined! They'll break you and you'll tell them everything you know! And even then they won't let you die. They'll keep you alive like a lab rat, as they try to isolate some kind of smartness gene that can be traced back to Solomon. Just like your father, I bet you've hardly ever had a sick day in your life! What do you think your liver alone is worth on the black market of gene and organ therapy treatments? They'll steal your treasure and then whatever secrets your body has. They'll justify everything they do to you by their own screwed up, wacko reasoning that says the ends justify the means! They'll do all that and more to you unless I can make such a mess of destroying the treasure that everyone will firmly believe it's out of play forever and that you went with it!"

Touched beyond words, I stared at him thoughtfully.

"What did they do to you?" I asked softly.

"Enough!" was all he said.

"Flint?"

He looked at me, emotion still high in his face.

"I love you too, and because I love you and trust you more than anyone else, I'm going to tell you something. Remember what you said earlier about wishing that the Earth would open up and swallow the treasure?"

He nodded.

"Well, something like that will happen to the treasure, if they try to take it."

He looked at me, puzzled. "You're actually giving me a hint?"

I shook my head no, "Consider it a warning, a sort of heads up when the time comes, if it comes. One more thing, run left. Everyone else will run right, but you need to run left. That is very important!"

He nodded, "Thank you Lisa. I'm not sure for what, but I thank you. Now get back over here!"

I let my face assume a regal pose and my voice deepened. "Do you presume to command a Queen?"

His eyes lit up in an entirely different way, "Now that is downright sexy! But yes, in answer to your question, dear Candace, I do so presume!"

I giggled, as he scooted me back across the seat against him.

Chapter Fourteen

Frustration

We landed in the late afternoon on the Congo itself. I was surprised to soon see a motor boat cut out from the shoreline and head toward us. I glanced at Flint, but he didn't seem to be alarmed by the boat's approach and then I saw why.

The boats occupants were Tyre and Galloway. I might have known these two would show up again. Tyre had traded in his Dick Tracey fedora for a weather beaten hat straight out of Indiana Jones.

One couldn't deny the fact that the man liked his hats. Galloway, in true typical American fashion, was wearing a baseball cap with John Deere emblazoned across it in green lettering. A little less obvious might have been helpful, but Galloway wasn't going to pull off being anything other than what he was, which was a rowdy, country loving, southern boy rebel at heart.

Tyre, on the other hand, pulled off secret agent man rather well, I thought. He had no accent; not even so much as an inflection of speech. His features were slightly Eurasian in appearance, which had me placing him in the northern European region as a place of origin, but in truth I had no idea.

He must be a lover of American film cinema, if his stylish get ups were anything to go by. When the boat reached us, they moved out of it onto one of the pontoons and then, surprisingly, began to switch places with us.

I overheard Flint ask Tyre, "The competition arrive yet?"

"Several members, most notably the CIA, but they're not the one's you have to worry about. The homegrown boys know we're here and they're closing in fast," Tyre responded.

How did that bit of information, regarding the CIA being added to the list of tomb robbers, not surprise me?

I stepped down into the boat and Galloway called out, "Good luck, you two!"

Flint waved and we moved off from the plane, as it roared back to life.

I looked at the little plane rather fondly as it took off. I'd had love expressed toward me in that little plane and now, as I glanced at Flint's strong features in the evening shadows, I just prayed I'd get to experience a lifetime to go along with this new found love.

Flint pulled the boat alongside the muddy bank and pushed me into the shallows, as he quickly followed after me, letting the boat drift away down the river. Together we slogged up the bank and started walking out over the barren plain with nothing in sight.

"So, what's the plan?" I asked, not liking the idea of walking the African plains in this unstable area in either broad daylight or by moonlight.

We ambled down into a depression that had some shrubbery. I was starting to wonder if I was going to get an answer when Flint lifted the edge of a sand camouflaged tarp and flicked it back to reveal a British Landover type jeep, which instantly made me feel better.

Once we were in it, Flint opened a sack and handed me a plastic bag. "Allow me to present your dinner, your highness."

I wrinkled up my face distastefully, when I realized it was a military ration pack. He just laughed and started driving.

"You never answered my question," I said pointedly.

He glanced over, "You have your secrets and I have mine."

He couldn't be serious!

I saw his mouth twitch slightly and then I knew he was playing me. I socked him in the shoulder.

“Ouch! You’re mean!”

“Oh shut up, you wussy, and spill the beans!”

“You just told me to shut up and I’m supposed to tell you anything?”

I raised my fist again and he chuckled. “I know where three of the old caravan stops are.”

“Three?” I glanced at him, surprised.

“That’s right, three. Your father was only told of two. Ahmed and Phillip quickly came to the conclusion that your father wasn’t to be trusted, especially when it concerned money. They outlined their first two discoveries in great detail, but said they were ambushed by a group of raiders when they tried to go on, which was only partly true. They were ambushed on the way back from the third site, not going to it, as they had told your father. Your father, deeming the expedition a waste of his time, refused to pay the survivors what he had agreed to and told the two men that, if they told anyone of what they had been hunting for, their lives would be forfeit. The two men split and went dark for a few years and then, as they had planned, they started to get ready to return to the third caravan stop; but fate intervened. Phillip got in trouble and, to bargain his way out, he leaked what he knew of the treasure to outsiders. Ahmed, well Ahmed found love and was content with what he had in life without risking everything to go back.”

“Flint, the treasure is not at this caravan stop.”

“Glad you clarified that for me, but I already knew that. However there was more than enough gold fragments left to entice the greed of the two men, enough to give them a couple of million each, according to Phillip. More interesting to me is that Ahmed said that there were murals depicting various scenes that had been stunningly preserved in the dry desert air. He hadn’t gotten to examine them for very long and he dared not take any pictures for fear of your father finding them. Your father had both men searched quite extensively. I’m hoping that I can beat whoever Phillip told about the place to it and that some of the murals there will show me the next stop. Either way you can kick back and relax as it will take a couple of days to get there.”

I leaned back against the seat and turned my face to the window. A nervous tick started jumping above one eye. I knew nothing of this surviving caravan stop that still had gold chunks littering the floor and, apparently, neither had the last Candace. Just what secrets might these murals reveal?

Days passed, and then, on the third morning, Flint literally drove right up to a mud brick wall of what looked like nothing more than a randomly placed wall half-buried in a sea of sand. With a sinking feeling, I realized that Flint had found the caravan stop with near pin point accuracy.

No entrance appeared visible in the long, mud brick wall, still left exposed by the relentless desert winds. No wonder not very many people had found this place; it would have been easy to miss in the sand dunes. Flint rooted around in the back of the Landrover and pulled out a pick.

He walked right up to the brick wall and started prying a door out of the aged mud brick. Sweat gleamed off his bare arms and his shirt was soon drenched. I couldn’t help but admire the specimen that he was as the wet shirt clung to him.

His voice shook me out of my day dreaming, “Would you like the honors?”

He was gesturing to the hole he had created in the wall. I glanced at the dark hole. My mind filled with all the dark things that could be in there and I shook my head, no.

“You mean you’re going to make me go down through the small, dark and sinister hole first?” he asked, sounding exasperated.

With a slight smile I said, “You’re just the man for the job!”

He smiled like a Cheshire cat and said, “That’s right! I am.”

Before I could retort he ducked inside and I was suddenly left alone in the whispering desert. Nervously, I looked around and then, making an effort not to think about it too much, I ducked inside

with a gasp.

“Didn’t take long for you to join the party,” he said wryly.

“I thought you might hurt yourself, in here all alone, so I came in to save you.”

The beam of Flint’s flashlight shown into my face briefly and I heard him grunt something as he blinded me with the light. The beam of light went back to examining the long corridor in which we stood. It stretched out a long distance to either side of us.

“This would have been where they chambered the camels, a lot of camels,” Flint said. His beam found an opening in the opposing wall down the corridor from us.

“The storage areas must be through there,” He headed for the opening and, not wanting to be left alone in the dark, I quickly followed. Something on the floor tripped me and, with a half scream of panicked horror, I plunged forward, barely catching myself against Flint’s back.

He turned and finished pulling me upright. Breathing hard, I watched as he stooped and picked something up from the floor. It was a clump of something.

“Thousand year old camel dung. I bet somebody out there would pay good money to have this perfectly preserved specimen of camel excrement. Just think what this could tell us. It could shed new light into what a camel’s life was like in the not so ancient past,” Flint said, in a fake tone of sincerity.

I just rolled my eyes in response to his philosophical ramblings over a clump of manure and he chuckled, tossing the clump to the side in the process.

The strange thing was that, in a way, he was right. Someone out there probably would have paid good money for an old piece of crap.

What strange things humans were invariably giving value to. I followed Flint into the next room. This must have been where the caravan men stayed. The ceiling was blackened by the smoke of long ago fires.

Flint corrected my earlier assessment of the rooms’ purpose. “Slaves and camel drivers were probably housed in this room. The caravan guides and guards would have something finer than this.”

I nodded and we continued on through the room, littered with the dusty remnants of artifacts of the once thriving caravan trade. This room alone would be a treasure trove of interest to any archeologist.

I stepped up beside Flint as he stood in the portal of yet another doorway and gasped.

The ceiling was a lot higher. Filling the large domed room was a cone tipped mound, the point of which stretched almost to the ceiling. For a moment I thought it was gold, but the color was wrong. Flint stepped forward and dipped a hand into the sand-like substance of the mound.

“Salt! Either the ancient commodities market was flooded with the stuff and these caravan dudes were stock piling and waiting for a better price or our ancient savvy camel traders were preparing for a blow out fire sale during an ancient bull market.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his comparison of olden times with the vernacular of the present. In general, Flint was just fun to be around.

“There must have been ramps outside to lead the camels up onto the roof of the building. Then, they must have opened portals in the roof and dumped the salt down to have made such a large conical pile of it.”

Flint was flashing the beam of his flashlight all over the place taking in the room filled with salt.

I caught glimpses of boyish delight all over his face and I stated, “You really like doing this, don’t you? Discovering the past, whether it’s a fortune in gold or just a pile of salt.”

I saw him grin big in response.

“In another life I think I would have liked to have been a Biblical archeologist. This case has been a bit of a dream come true for me and, just for your information, this isn’t just a big pile of salt. Granted, a road salt company in New England might only give you a couple of bucks for a pile of salt like this today, but back in the day this stuff was currency! During Roman times, the officials rarely

had the extra gold needed to pay their legionaries so they paid them with salt, which is where the common phrase ‘worth your salt’ comes from. This pile of salt was a veritable fortune back then.”

“I stand corrected then, not just a pile of salt.”

His face turned sheepish looking, “Sorry, I just love history and this kind of stuff. I didn’t mean to fill your ear with useless information.”

“I don’t mind. I like how knowledgeable and history savvy you are. I bet you’ll make really smart kids.”

He coughed and gave me a look of, ‘what did you say?’

I just smiled and gestured my head toward a portal doorway on the other side of the large salt room, “Shall we continue the expedition, Dr. Jones?”

I brushed past him toward the doorway, but he caught me and I glanced up into his darkened features. I didn’t fear the tight hold he had on my arms or the impassioned state I could tell he was in.

It was actually kind of exciting, feeling his power, as well as his barely leashed control. I felt him reign himself in and again, I marveled at the kind of man that he was.

He had me alone, far from any form of help, and he could do anything he wanted to me. Yet, I’d never felt safer with a man.

Gruffly, he spoke as he let go, “When this is over…” he left the rest unsaid and turned to the other open doorway, but I understood what he meant.

I wanted it too.

I followed him into the next room; it was a match to the salt room, except this room was empty. That is, except for the glittering display of shiny dust lying upon the floor.

Flint knelt down and scooped up a handful of the dust and shined the beam of the flashlight onto the contents of his palm. The dust was liberally laced with bright shiny gold flecks.

“Yeah, I’d say several million was a somewhat fair estimate. Still, a poor thing to lose your life over.” Flint said introspectively.

He tilted his hand and let the dust fall back to the ground. There was another doorway and he walked to it across the expanse of the room.

“Bingo!”

I cringed inwardly at the excitement I heard in his voice. Stepping up to the door, I saw that it wasn’t gold that had grabbed his interest, but the finely plastered walls that were adorned with several revealing murals; very revealing murals!

I kept a nonchalant face, as he meticulously photographed everything!

I had to destroy that camera!

He seemed to be done. He started pulling small objects out of his pack and began slapping them to the walls. What was he doing?

And then it dawned on me, they were explosives.

I looked at the beautiful murals and I felt like protesting, even though, for the treasure’s sake, it was a good thing for this place to be destroyed.

He came up to me and he must have read my face, “Yes, I know it’s terrible, but it’s the best thing all around and has to be done in this situation.”

“You really are going to destroy the treasure aren’t you?”

“Yes Lisa, I am.”

He took my hand and led me out the way we had come, slapping explosives to the walls as he went. As we resurfaced back out into the heat and daylight, I noticed that the camera had disappeared.

He got into the Landrover, as did I, and we left. He stopped a short distance off, brought out a control from a pocket and, with his face looking decidedly grim, he pushed the red button on it.

The sounds of the explosives going off were surprisingly muffled. The piled up sands of the encroaching dune cascaded down into the shattered space of the old caravan stop.

When the dust settled there was nothing left to see but the endless sand dunes all around us. Another

part of the past was gone forever.

Flint started driving again and, for awhile, I really didn't care where he was driving me. But, after awhile, that wore off when I realized that we weren't headed back the way we had come. We were going deeper into the desert!

I looked over at him curiously, "Why aren't we going back? You got what you came for, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I think I got what I needed, but I thought it would be safer to head this way than to take the same route back, as we might have been followed."

I glanced back behind us and then did a double take at the dust cloud being kicked up in the distance by at least five vehicles spread out behind us. I turned back to Flint as alarm went through me at the knowledge that we were already being followed!

"We are being followed, Flint!"

He glanced in the mirror and wryly grinned, "Fancy that. Guess it was a good hunch I had, huh?"

"Who are they?"

"My guess, seeing their lack of air support, is that they're probably one of the terrorist groups in search of an unlimited meal plan," Flint said sardonically.

Oh great, we're being chased across the desert by terrorists that probably outnumber us twenty five to one or more!

"So what are you going to do when we run out of gas?" I asked.

"I've got a plan."

"Does this plan involve procuring other transportation? Because if you're headed for Ethiopia, I wish to state that I don't much fancy the idea of walking across the entire Sahara to get there!"

He just looked over at me with a cheesy grin and didn't answer. He had to have something up his sleeve; I just hoped it was something good.

Five hours later the rover lurched and then stuttered and I glanced pointedly over at him. It got worse, and then the rover died and we came to a stop in the sand. I glanced back at the still visible dust trails of our pursuers. This wasn't good!

All I had was the 9mm that Tyre had given me. It was something, but right now I felt like the only peace of mind to be found in this situation would be the comforting weight of an assault rifle and several grenades.

Flint got out, grabbing up his pack along with him, and started walking up the sand dune directly beside us.

Seriously?!

This was his plan? Drive into the dessert until you're out of gas and then walk? This is the Sahara!

What kind of idiot was he?

He turned briefly and called back, "You're not just going to sit there, are you Lisa? Come on!"

I got out, slamming the door hard behind me, and yelled back, "It makes more sense than what you're trying to do!"

He didn't pay any attention to me, but instead just kept climbing up the steep dune. I mentally stabbed him in the back as he climbed.

This was all his fault! Trust him, he says! Look where trusting a man has gotten me this time! I thought to myself, as I started up the dune after him.

I'd been sweating in the rover, but within minutes I was completely drenched. It was so hot!

In an hour I'd be completely dehydrated and easy pickings for the terrorists behind us, thanks to the genius up ahead of me. I let my mind go into just how stupid I thought all of this was.

His voice, from higher up, interrupted my chain of turbulent thought, "You know I can hear you?"

Actually, I hadn't realized that I had been giving voice to my frustrations, but out of the mixture of

embarrassment and anger that I felt I retorted, "Good!"

"You know, if you put as much energy into climbing this dune, as you are in talking about me, I bet you'd already be up here."

Oh, that did it!

Now he was trying to make it sound like all this was my fault! He was going to pay for this! I redoubled my efforts climbing up the mound.

Climbing the steep side of the sand dune could be best described as trying to work out on a treadmill pointed at the ceiling. The amount of effort needed to do either was about the same and I was beginning to drag, both mentally and physically. When I reached the top, I bent over with my hands on my knees breathing hard.

Giving Flint a piece of my mind was going to have to wait for a moment. I glanced up briefly, and something shiny caught my eye in the hollow of the dune below us.

I looked closer and saw the sleek outline of a small black helicopter. I glanced quickly up to Flint's sweaty face only to see him giving me a knowledgeable look.

"You could have told me that you had a chopper stashed!" I exclaimed.

"And you could have had a little more faith in me! I'll tell you when it's time to panic."

I glanced back. The dust trails were much closer now.

Flint took my hand and together we started down, half slipping and sliding.

"I was going to tell you, but it was just too much fun seeing you all mad."

"I have a bit of a temper," I admitted.

"You don't say, Your Highness."

"Don't call me Your Highness! I'm not a Queen!"

"Oh, yes you are!" he responded firmly, in a tone that didn't brook a negative reply.

"You're my Queen!"

The possessive quality of his words made my heart skip a beat. We had reached the sandy floor of the basin among the dunes and now we ran across it to the chopper.

He helped me in and then he got in. He started flipping toggle switches and other buttons and I began to relax. He started the chopper up. Well, that is, he tried to start it up.

It almost fired, but then it started coughing and died. He tried again and just got more coughing from the motor.

I studied his face, suddenly tight with concentration, as he tried to figure out the problem with the chopper.

"Should I start panicking now?" I asked softly into the headset.

It didn't seem like he had heard me. I heard him say, "Sand! Sand must have gotten into the air intake. Wait here, I'll be right back."

He pulled his headset off, got out of the cockpit and then disappeared from view. My gaze fell to his pack and the camera that I knew it held. I had to destroy those pictures!

It was my duty, but why then did I hesitate?

I knew why, but it didn't matter, protecting the treasure was more important. Wasn't it?

I slipped his pack open and quickly found the camera. I had been going to destroy the whole camera, but instead I just slipped the memory card out. I put the camera back the way I had found it and closed the pack back up.

I held the memory card for a moment, and before I could think better of what I was doing I snapped it in half. Opening my door slightly I tossed the pieces outside into the sand.

Several minutes later, Flint was back. He tried to start the chopper up again and this time it fired to life.

"Yes!" he exclaimed with a triumphant grin, looking over at me.

Wanly, I smiled back at him and managed to give him a thumbs up before I turned to gaze out my side window. He was so going to kill me when he found out!

Several hours passed, during which Flint tried to converse with me on multiple occasions, but the conversations all fell through. I could hardly bring myself to look at him, let alone talk with him, as if nothing was wrong. My conscience fairly ate me up inside.

All along, during the length of our relationship, Flint had been nothing but honest towards me about his intentions in regards to the treasure, as well as me. Yet I had doubted him, somehow expecting him to betray me in some way, but he hadn't and instead I had betrayed him.

I felt awful!

Was the treasure really worth enough to risk losing something of real value?

Surprisingly, the answer I kept getting was, no! I had to make this right!

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern evident in his tone.

In a rush of words I burst out, "I did it! I betrayed you! I'm sorry!"

Darn it all, I was crying again and viciously I wiped at the stupid tears.

He turned my head with his right hand and then, bringing my hand up to his lips, he kissed it.

Still holding my hand he asked, "So what form has this wicked betrayal taken?"

"I stole the memory card out of your camera and destroyed it!" I said, turning back to the window, feeling completely shamed by my actions.

"I see. Well, all in all, I'd say we're about even then."

My head whipped back around. "What?"

"Well, I did, after all, destroy a caravan stop belonging to you. I'll call us square if you'll agree to an equal trade off, one caravan stop equals one memory card."

I couldn't believe his reaction. "You're not mad at me?" I asked incredulously.

He kissed the knuckles of my hand again before releasing it.

"No, but I'm glad you told me what you did. Now, I do have to say that if you try to steal *this* memory card," he removed a memory card from his front shirt pocket and held it up with a grin, "I'll have to bend you over my knee and spank you."

As it dawned on me that I hadn't destroyed the memory card with the pictures on it, something else also occurred to me. I was relieved.

Why?

If I was relieved that Flint still had the ability to find the treasure, then it must mean that I wanted him to find it, but why?

The answer seemed simple enough. I wanted him to destroy it so we could be together.

The truth was startling, but none the less true. I still couldn't believe that he wasn't more affected by my betrayal of him than he appeared to be.

"You're really not angry with me?" I asked, as I met his gaze.

"You're sorry, aren't you?"

I nodded, yes, and he shrugged as if to say, "Well, there you go."

"Would you really spank me?" I asked curiously.

He gave me an eyebrow raise that said he most certainly would.

My eyes drifted to his hand and my face flushed at the idea of it. Spanking, however unpleasant, wasn't really the answer to a serious breach of trust in a relationship.

I knew Flint enough to know that he would never hurt me. His threat was more of an erotic tease to be carried out in the bedroom than anything disciplinary.

The question remained, what would he do if I really messed up again?

"Would you do anything else, besides spanking me, if I tried to steal that card again?"

He burst out laughing, "What's this? You got off the hook easy enough with your first crime that you're back and willing to tempt the punishment of another offense?"

"I, no..."

I'd botched the question and was starting to turn away in embarrassment, when his fingers caught

my chin and stopped me.

His gaze was direct and kind, “I think what you were trying to ask was, ‘If you mess up again, how long will I stay with you before calling it quits?’ That sound about right?”

I nodded.

“I’ve made mistakes and so have you, and we’re both likely to do so in the future. Not that either of us wants to, but our basic human nature is bound to raise its ugly head at some point. The mistake that I never want to make would be to ever turn my back on the special thing that you and I have going. To that end, I’m willing to put up with a lot! How about you?”

I nodded and he settled back into his seat.

“I love you!” I said passionately.

He smiled and combed some hair back away from my eyes, “I love you too, Lisa.”

Chapter Fifteen

Decision of the Heart

That night I lay staring up at the starry heavens with the warm sand against my back trying to make sense of everything. From time to time, I could hear Flint's frustrated muttering to himself.

Solving the riddle of the treasure from the mural pictures wouldn't be easy for him. In fact, it could be impossible. I had seen only a vague reference to it, something that could easily be overlooked.

It was decision time. What did I want most?

Continued obedience to a past history of tradition that, while rich in meaning and symbolism, was also empty of what I craved most.

Or, did I let myself be free to find the love I'd always dreamed of and now had and craved to experience more.

It was sort of an easy answer, albeit a bittersweet one. I got up off the sand, hugging myself with my arms, as the evening air was chilly in the desert. Even though it was nighttime, it was surprisingly light outside.

The moon was just over half full and the stars were so bright, as they had no competing city lights to dim their brightness in the night sky. Flint was easy to pick out where he reclined against a sand bank.

The glow of the tablet in his hands lit up his frustrated features. He glanced up, surprised, as I neared him.

"I thought you'd turned in for the night," he said, and I shook my head, no.

I knelt down on the sand in front of him and, turning, I pushed myself backward between Flint's knees, until I sat between his legs and rested back against his chest.

His voice near my ear sounded husky as he said, "Help yourself to my body heat, why don't you."

I planned on it. He was so warm.

He had the tablet in one hand that rested on a knee. I slipped it out of his grasp and he let me have it, in a further sign of his undaunted trust in me.

His voice had a hint of humor to it as he said into my ear, "You know that's a punishable offense, stealing my pictures?"

"Then punish me," I rejoined.

His breathing stopped and I patted myself on the back for successfully rattling his cage. The muscled physique he possessed tightened all around me, but I stayed where I was, idly flipping through the pictures of the murals on his tablet with my finger. After a while his breathing returned to normal and I heard him sigh.

What he didn't know, was that I was almost as impatient as he was to deepen our relationship to that of lovers. But now, as tempting as it was, wasn't the right time. I wanted to be more than just this man's lover, and the realization of that goal was worth waiting for.

His voice interrupted my impassioned thoughts, "I've stared at these bloody pictures for hours and I don't see anything. I don't know why you were so nervous. I have half a mind to smash this thing against a rock, and throw the pieces into space!"

I smiled. "Maybe you're just not looking in the right places," I said softly.

I found the picture I was looking for and pointed, "What does this remind you of?"

I felt him peer over my shoulder, "An oasis, except for..." His voice trailed off, as he studied the picture intently.

“There are no palm trees,” I finished for him.

I started to talk further, but he reached for the tablet and turned it off, which surprised me.

His voice against my ear spoke, “Lisa, when I was expressing my frustration, I wasn’t asking you for help in finding the treasure.”

“I know you weren’t.”

“Then why are you helping me? You swore that you wouldn’t.”

“I know what I said, but I’ve changed my mind.”

There was silence for a few minutes and then he asked, “What made you change it?”

“I’ve decided that a future spent in your arms is more of what I want for my life than to be a queen caretaker over a fortune that I really wish didn’t exist anyway.”

His arms closed around me and my eyes drifted shut, relishing the warmth and security he offered me. One warm hand drifted up the front of my throat and pushed my chin back and to the side for his kiss.

Drawing back for a second, he said, “I’m glad that’s how you feel about it. Do you mind if I kiss you like this all night?”

“Please do,” I whispered back.

The chopper ride was rather companionable over the next several days. Just when we were getting low on fuel, Flint would land somewhere, in the middle of nowhere it seemed, to get more.

I was eager for all this to just be done with, and I was growing more optimistic about the chances of that, the closer we got.

I directed Flint where to go. When we set down he gave me a strange look. “What?” I asked.

“Where the heck are we? This isn’t near any reputable Kush building sites.”

“That makes it the best place to hide something, don’t you think?” I said, with a mysterious smile.

There was nothing overly remarkable about our landing spot other than that there was no sign of any habitation nearby. Flint shut off the chopper and we got out.

I pointed to the east, “The pools lie two miles that way. I thought it was best to keep some distance from the entrance so as to avoid announcing our presence. I’m confident that none of the interested parties know of the entrance yet, other than my father, but it would be best to be cautious.”

Flint nodded, as he slung his pack over his left shoulder and then the strap of an assault rifle over the other. In his left hand he carried a black briefcase, which I assumed was some sort of explosive.

“Will that be enough, do you think?” I asked, eyeing the small case doubtfully.

He chuckled, “Yeah, I think it will do the job. I hope so anyway. You never can tell with Soviet era parts. The Russians were known to cut some corners in their day.”

My face turned white and I stammered slightly as I asked, “What kind of bomb is it?”

He shook his head no, “It’s best that you don’t know. Trust me. It isn’t exactly street legal, if you know what I mean.”

I turned away and started walking through the bush habitat. I reached up and wiped my forehead, suddenly damp with sweat. Just who was I getting involved with?

Flint caught up with me, a look of concern written across his features, “I know honey! I have a lot of explaining to do and I promise that I will, when I get the chance!”

I glanced at him, “You promise?”

He nodded his head vigorously.

“That thing isn’t nuclear is it? Because I don’t want any of my people hurt or sickened by it!”

“No, no! It’s not nuclear, but it’ll make a heck of a bang. It’s the kind of bomb that only a developed nation would be able to produce.”

I glanced at him again, "So, you're hoping that if there's an investigation as to what happened, the finger will point to a major world power being behind the destruction of the treasure and not you?"

"That's the plan."

"I just hope you don't blow us up with the treasure," I said meaningfully.

"Yeah, I hope not too! Kind of looking forward to the rest of life here on out."

Something in his tone sparked my interest. "You weren't looking forward to the rest of your life before?"

He met my gaze, "Before you, I wasn't particularly excited about anything."

My hand reached out and he took it. We walked like that for a ways.

"Looks clear," Flint said under his breath.

It was true; I couldn't see any sign of activity around the pools. I stepped out from hiding and approached the central pool. Flint followed, looking around as if he didn't understand something.

He voiced his question, "I don't understand this. You've got five geocentrally placed pools of water, a lot of water in the middle of nowhere to be sure. The pools have an obvious influence of human construction, but I've never heard mention of this place. All this water and there's nobody here and no sign as to where so much water is coming from. The surrounding area is downright arid!"

I just smiled, as I walked along the dusty ground that bordered one of the pools.

He exclaimed again, "I don't even see where animals have come to drink! Is the water poisonous?"

"No," I said, as I stopped.

I squatted down and dipped my hand in the water, brought it to my mouth and drank of the crystal clear water. It was just as I had remembered it.

"Okay, I'm convinced it's not poison, but why are you the only one drinking it?"

I scooped both my hands into the water and cupped them together. I rose to my feet and approached Flint with the water held in my cupped hands.

"No one drinks of the water, because only queens and their kings may drink of it." I held the water out to him and he looked a little stunned at the ceremonialism of my gesture.

His head started to lower to my hands when he stopped, "Just so you know, I'm not at all for this custom of kings committing hari-kari because their ladies deemed it so."

I grinned, "Some customs are better left in the past, I think."

His head lowered and he drank the water, all of it.

He looked up at me in surprise, "That's the best tasting water I've ever had! Somebody should bottle that."

I couldn't agree more. I turned back and continued on towards the central pool.

"So, do you realize that everything about you has changed since you've neared these pools?" Flint asked curiously.

I looked back in surprise, "In what way?"

"Your walk, the way you carry your head high, and the deeper confidence with which you speak your words."

I nodded.

The old Candace had taught me all that. I had soaked up her instruction like I had the love that she had showered on me.

"She must have been very special for you to care so much," I heard Flint say softly, which caused me to realize that there were tears on my face. I was crying again!

"Do you feel like you're betraying her by helping me destroy the treasure?" Flint asked softly.

"I thought I was, but now I'm not so sure. In her last words to me, she told me that when she had been young she had made a mistake that she didn't want me to make. She told me to follow my heart,

and that is just what I'm doing. I think she knew this day was coming."

Flint nodded.

I turned back to the central pool. It was time for the past to go. I approached the circular central pool.

"I hope you can hold your breath for a long time, Flint."

There were stones lying on the ground and I started to pry several of them up. Pulling them free revealed carved out stone handles on the undersides.

Glancing up at Flint I said, "With the weight you're carrying you'll probably not need a weight. In the old days they wore so much golden jewelry that they didn't need a weight either."

I held a stone in each hand, stepped into the water and kept stepping down, hyperventilating slightly. Flint, with a slight pause of hesitation, followed.

Once he was all the way under the water he saw more clearly for himself the spiral stone staircase that we were walking down.

Memories of my first time walking down these stairs began to flood into my mind, as I walked down into the crystal clear water. I had been so in awe of the Candace and this descent into the water had only helped to reinforce how cool she was.

Thirty feet down, the stairs ended at a door and I pushed a series of stone panels. The door opened to a dark void of yet more water. Only queens knew the combination.

I waited for Flint and, grasping him firmly, I made sure that he came through the door with me. We stepped down into something dark and I made him sit down.

Nothing happened for a moment and then a series of groans sounded, as the stone weights began to depress and our barge began to move. It moved quite fast into the dark void and, as always, my lungs had begun to burn, in need of air.

Apparently holding one's breath for a long time hadn't been much of a problem for my ancestors, but for me it was.

Just when I thought I would take a gulp of water and drown, the barge surged up to the surface and I opened my mouth gulping in air. Flint was doing the same.

"I've been on some death defying theme park rides, but this one takes the cake!" Flint huffed out.

I couldn't disagree with him there. I didn't bother telling him that, if the wrong combination of panels was punched in at the door, the barge went somewhere else entirely. More people than he knew had found the treasure over the years, but they'd fallen prey to the clever door mechanisms of the Queen's Gate.

My father knew of the door, but not the combination to open it. I stood up and walked the length of the barge to the stairs at the other end in complete darkness, as my feet knew the way by faith.

My hands found the twin pedestals that marked the landing of the Queen's Haven and I reached for levers to either side and pulled.

There was a swish of sound and the chamber lit up in a jeweled array of color. Tunnels from the surface reflected down light that was refracted by the use of crystals into a glittering intensity of color that swept throughout the entrance of the Queens' Haven.

I turned my head to see Flint sitting in stunned shock at what the glittering light revealed. I well knew what he was experiencing, as I had once been in his place. It was hard to believe a place like this had ever existed in the time of the Earth.

We were in a massive cavern, which was mostly dark and full with water, except for this end of it. Before me, across an inlaid floor of tile studded with polished gems, rose a series of steps to a platform from which massive pillars rose to bolster the ceiling of the native rock.

Gems and crystals glittered here and there, but what caught the eye was that the steps and the pillars themselves were overlaid with gold.

"Welcome to the Queens' Haven."

Flint looked at me and I wondered, not for the first time, whether he would be able to destroy the treasure.

He got up and walked up to me, still looking at the golden display before him and said, “Today I’m really going to hate my job!”

He glanced at me and made a movement with his hand, “After you, my Queen. I need to get the bomb placed squarely in the middle of the treasure room.”

I nodded, and started past the pedestal towards the golden pillars, as Flint followed.

My eyes skipped off to the side, as I saw something floating on the dark waters. It was a scuba flipper!

Divers! Oxygen tanks!

Could the central pool be bypassed in order to reach this cavern?

Evidently so, which meant someone was here!

I stopped, as the alarm of that realization shot through me. I started to turn, to push Flint back toward the barge, when several dark figures stepped out from behind the pillars ahead of us.

Flint jerked me abruptly behind him and started to raise his rifle to fire, even as several bullets crashed into him, knocking him back against me. He started to fall, dropping the rifle and the case, and I tried to catch him and break his fall to the ground.

No, this couldn’t be happening!

Oh God!

In a panic, I turned him over on the floor. He was unconscious and pale looking, which scared me to death. I checked for a pulse and sobbed in relief when I found one.

His arm was bloody and I could see blood welling up fast out of his thigh through his torn pants. Was he hit elsewhere too?

I ripped his shirt open in the front and in relief I saw he was wearing a light vest.

Ripping the vest open I gasped as I saw more blood, but then I recovered, when I realized that the bullets hadn’t gone into him but instead had just split the skin.

The leg wound was the worst. I had to get the bleeding stopped!

Feeling at his leg I noticed that the bullet had gone through cleanly. I ripped part of his shirt up, made two pads and put them on each of the wounds. Then, taking the rest of his shirt, I tied it tightly around his thigh overtop the two pads. The bleeding slowed to a stop and I turned my attention to his arm.

It was nothing more than a slight groove from where a bullet had grazed him. A shadow fell across me and I knew who it was without bothering to look up.

My fingers were shaking as I wrapped his leg with additional material from my over shirt. I hated this! I hated the injuries that my man had suffered for me, but most of all I hated my father! His avarice and greed soaked ambition had done this!

Oh God, please don’t let him die! I wanted everything there was to do with this man. I had been so close to everything I had ever wanted and now this!

“Why do you waste your time with this man? You know I’m going to kill him.”

I looked up into the eyes of my father, who even now was bringing up a massive pistol to take aim at Flint’s heart.

I met his gaze with steady resolve and my voice didn’t quiver as I spoke, even though it felt like my insides were shaking apart.

“If this man dies, so will you and everyone that you’ve brought with you! The treasure will be lost forever and you will have no golden legacy!”

The pistol swiveled from Flint’s heart to my head, but I didn’t drop my gaze.

“And who are you to threaten me so? I have conquered the riddle of this place and of the treasure! It is all mine! Again I say, who are you, little half breed whelp of mine, to threaten me so?” Iya said roughly.

I saw the finger tighten on the trigger and I knew that I was seconds away from my own death. I rose to my feet, and I stepped forward toward my father, until the muzzle of the pistol was pressed into my chest.

Firmly, I responded with all the cold distain that I could muster for this man, with whom it shamed me to admit that I shared blood, "I am Candace! Queen of Queens and ruler over Kings! This is my domain and I alone rule here! Kill me and you die. Steal the treasure without my blessing and you'll suffer worse than death. I am the Queen and I have spoken! Heed my words wisely!"

I slammed my foot down and the cavern's lighting shifted to more of a reddish haze.

Iya blinked and looked around. He slammed his foot down too, but nothing happened.

The muzzle of the pistol drifted away and he gave a slight nod, as his characteristic wolfish smile returned, "You are the Queen, but first and foremost you are my daughter and you will help me get all the treasure!"

He turned and gestured at several of his men. "Come, carry the man and be quick! I want to see the rest of my treasure!"

"You do remember, Mr. Muatombo, that this is a joint venture, do you not?" A slim man, with white skin and pale blond hair stepped forward.

The man had a European accent that matched the men who had tried to kill us in Barcelona. The man had the cold eyes of a snake.

There was something darker about the man than just his appearance, though. Father's own snakish charm came out as he responded to the man.

"But of course Heinrich, as we agreed, half the treasure will go to your bank directly and you know that I intend to heavily invest my share with you. So relax, we are this close to the find of the ages and I will share it with you as promised."

Yeah, right, my father had never learned the virtue of sharing anything with anyone. The slim man had a short future ahead of him, if he believed my father. The best he could look forward to was a clean shot to the back of the head, if he was lucky.

The man called Heinrich smiled back at my father. The smile had a calculated false quality to it, which caused me to reconsider my assessment of him as a pushover.

The man was surrounded by my father's henchmen, who, as it was, were my half brothers and yet the man maintained his cool resolve. Despite being all alone, Heinrich appeared very much in control of the situation.

Perhaps he wasn't such an easy mark. I wondered if my father knew that. I doubted it as he tended to only respect people that were a threat to him physically and not individuals that he could squash out with one choking hand.

Something else I wondered about was if father knew that this Swiss backed businessman he had partnered up with, had been trying to kill Flint and I in Barcelona?

Not question us about the treasure, but to simply just kill us. I doubted that he'd listen even if I told him. His eyes were too full of treasure to let any sane thought through.

Heinrich gestured to us, "You should just kill them now and be done with it. They cannot be allowed to live, to speak of what they have seen."

Iya's temper flared. He wasn't a man that could tolerate being dictated to, much less being ordered around, even if he was planning to do what was being ordered of him. He was prideful to a fault.

"She is my daughter and I will decide her fate, not you! The man is my guest. It is hard to find a good chess player and he plays chess very well! Better than you, I think. They live, until I say otherwise!" Iya finished angrily, thumbing his chest with a fist.

The Heinrich fellow wisely retreated, nodding deferentially before moving away. Iya may have thought he won the test of wills, but everything the slim man did seemed calculated to some, as yet unseen, endgame.

I glanced down to see Flint's eyes open. Two of my brothers were approaching. We didn't have long to talk.

"I'm sorry I didn't protect you," he whispered up at me.

More tears came to my eyes. "Yes, you did! In so many ways you have, but now it's time to let me protect you! Remember what I said about this place?"

He nodded, "Where's my case?"

I glanced up in time to see one of my brothers toss the case into the water.

Flint saw him do it too. "How deep is that water?"

I looked at him curiously, "I don't know exactly, but I'd say it's pretty deep, why?"

My brothers were getting close.

"Because in," he glanced at his watch, "Fifteen minutes you're going to have a diversion worthy event, when you'll be able to freely do whatever it is you can to destroy this place!"

His hand gripped my arm tightly, "You must destroy this place, even if it means we go up with it! So many will die if you don't!"

My hand squeezed over his on my arm and I whispered back, "I swear it on my love for you."

My brothers were beside us and one of them was Marshawn.

"Help me get him up, Marshawn, and then I'll take him from there."

He looked at me dubiously, but with his characteristic easy grin he complied with my wishes.

"Way to go, backing the old man down like that, sis! I didn't think anyone could do it," Marshawn said.

I met his eyes boldly, "I didn't back him down. He still intends to kill us. All I did was buy us some time and if you're as smart as I think you are Marshawn, you'll do the same."

He gave me a curious look as he helped Flint up to his feet. Flint's arm came around my shoulders, but I could tell he was trying to not put too much of his weight on me.

"Stop being a fool and put your weight on me! I'm strong!" I said.

His face was whitish and I knew he was in pain, but he smiled anyway, "Yes, there's no doubting that. You're strong in more ways than one."

He settled more of his weight on me and together we started out across the floor towards the golden pillars through which Iya and Heinrich were already disappearing.

"What are you planning?" he whispered, when we had gained a little distance on our guards.

"Just trust me."

He chuckled, "How the tables have turned."

He groaned, as we started up the stairs and he had to lift his leg up. I cringed with every step that he took. Was it always like this, that you felt the pain of the one you loved?

We made our way through the row of golden columns to the large cavern beyond. The artfully crafted treasures of centuries were piled high throughout the room.

Gems of unimaginable proportions and quality were everywhere, but it was the gold, that caught and glistened in the crystal refracted light, that took the breath away. It was everywhere.

"It would seem your ancestors managed to pile a few things away over the years," Flint muttered sardonically.

"This place wasn't always so littered with stuff. It was created by one of the first Candace's as a sort of haven away from the public's eye. Much later, when the empire was starting to fade, most of the treasures you see were brought here for safe keeping."

"A very interesting tale, detective Tauranto, but as amazing as this treasure room is, where is the rest of the treasure?" Heinrich asked.

I stopped our progress through the room. "What?" I asked dumbly.

I looked around me, was the man blind or just insane? There was an incalculable treasure of antiquity to be found all around him and he was asking for more.

"I must applaud your acting skills, but while this treasure is indeed marvelous it cannot be the sum

and total of the treasure rumored about over the years. Where is the gold, or should I better put it, where's the unrefined raw gold? That is what I'm most interested in."

This man wasn't going to take no for an answer, even if it was the truth. I glanced around again and, in the process, caught a glimpse of Flint's watch. I had just over eight minutes. An idea crystallized in my brain spurred on by the little man's greediness.

"Very well, I'll take you to the rest of the treasure if you promise that my friend and I can go free and live comfortably for the rest of our lives."

"But of course! It is the least that I could offer. You have my word."

I hoped my face didn't show the skepticism I had at the reality of the unfaithfulness of his words.

"Sheba's throne will reveal the treasure," I said softly.

Heinrich actually looked excited, in a sort of sick, psychotic way, as I started heading on through the treasure room to an overlooked pillared doorway at the far end of it.

I caught a glimpse of my father's face. He looked puzzled, good! I hoped he stayed that way.

"Do you think you could put on a little speed?" I whispered to Flint.

"Will do," Flint said through gritted teeth.

We made the doorway and walked on through. I kept tugging Flint onward and off to the side of the royal throne room, as everyone else pretty much came to a stop and stared in wonder at the royal dais situated on the other end of the room. Even Flint seemed sucked in by the fascination of gazing at it and the image that dominated the wall beyond the throne.

Flint looked surprised, when I leaned him up against the pillar of a side doorway. He glanced at the doorway; it was the only one on this side of the royal chamber room. The other side had five doorways. His eyes met mine in sudden knowledge that this was the place I had told him of.

"Remember?" I asked.

"Yes, but I'm not going to be able to run."

"I have a plan."

Marshawn was still gazing distractedly at the glory of Sheba's throne and the massive golden image of an earthly woman's beautiful face set off against a background setting of precious stones.

He was surprised, when I abruptly caught him by the throat and dragged him closer.

"What's it gonna be Marshawn, pawn or something more?"

"What?" he asked surprised.

"To put it in my father's vernacular; I'm the Queen and thus the most powerful piece on the board. In father's way of thinking you're nothing but a disposable pawn, Marshawn. I think you could be something more than that, a bishop or rook perhaps. A chess piece that has more control over its own future Marshawn."

"You forget who moves the pieces, dear sister."

I shook my head and pointed to Flint, "Not anymore."

Marshawn glanced at Flint and then back at me and tentatively asked, "What's my move?"

"A bishop or a rook, while powerful can only move in two directions and thus they are vulnerable." I pointed to the group still gawking over the throne room and then to the darkened doorway.

"A Queen can cover you from every angle, however."

Marshawn glanced nervously at Flint, guessing that his purpose was to help him, "How long?"

"Seventeen seconds," responded Flint.

Marshawn nodded, "Okay."

I let go and moved off towards the group. I moved through them, until my back was to them, as I mentally ticked down the seconds. I reached zero, but nothing happened. What had gone wrong?

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Iya thundered out.

"Perhaps your daughter can answer that. Tell me dear, have you been waiting for a bang?" Heinrich

asked with a nasty smile, as he held up a device that I guessed was Flint's bomb, the timer had been stopped.

"What's going on here?" Iya bellowed.

"Oh, everything is quite under control Mr. Muatombo, although I have to say that your services will no longer be required."

Heinrich clapped his hands sharply and thirty or more heavily armed men poured into the room, with guns trained on Iya and his sons.

"We had a deal, Heinrich! Don't think that I haven't taken precautions against something such as this from happening," Iya bit out, stone faced, as he was relieved of his pistol.

Heinrich just shook his head. "You actually think yourself intelligent Iya, don't you? You're nothing but a mindless brute. Not that I mind, our organization has been making good use of individuals like you to do the dirty work for a long time. You've been nothing but a pawn in our game all along."

Iya, completely incensed, started for Heinrich, but Heinrich just smiled, "Unless you've discovered a way to walk through bullets, I wouldn't if I were you. You're too much of an arrogant fool to even put a vest on like our smart friend over there in the corner. Now there Iya, is a smart man, as is the whole organization behind him. Discovering the treasure is the crowning achievement of my career, but capturing him is no small accomplishment either."

Iya looked confused, "You're not a banker?"

Heinrich threw back his head and laughed unpleasantly. "Flint, tell him. Educate the mindless Jewish brute, if you can."

"I'm not Jewish!" growled Iya.

"Oh yes you are! Their blood runs thick within your veins!"

Something seemed to dawn within Iya's eyes, as he glanced at Flint.

"Yeah, that's right Iya; you hopped into bed with a bunch of Nazis this time, bum move on your part," Flint said, in response to the unasked question in Iya's eyes.

Heinrich looked displeasingly at Flint, "I don't care for your vernacular much, Flint! I'll see you suffer for that comment especially. We do not associate in any way with filthy Jews!"

"You collaborate with them to steal their own gold don't you?" Flint responded evenly.

Heinrich smiled and shrugged, "I have to admit the legitimacy of that point, I suppose. I take comfort in the fact that all this stolen wealth will single handedly usher in the dawning of a new Reich. This time we will succeed, not only in our conquest of any and all that oppose us, but also in the complete annihilation of your filthy kind!" he finished, fairly spitting out the last few words at Iya, with caustic venom lacing his tone, even as hatred shown from his eyes.

Iya had regained control and his face was a mask as he asked, "If you feel so strongly against me, then why am I still alive?"

"Perhaps because I wish to relish watching you suffer, as the treasure you have spent your whole life coveting, is taken away piece by piece. Now for a man like you, that will be torture. There is also the matter of your wealth. You are a very wealthy man in your own right and, even with this fabulous treasure we, just like you, can never have enough money to satisfy us. Once we have all your wealth we'll let you die, painfully that is. A man of your size will take some time to starve away I would imagine. Now, while this is all amusing it's distracting me from my main goal!"

Heinrich wheeled around to face me.

"You will show me the gold now and, as a favor, I'll let you have a bullet between the eyes and thus let you avoid having to witness your lover's torture, as well as experience your own."

The depth of this man's darkness was beyond anything I had ever encountered. The cold look of his eyes left me chilled and I turned away toward the distant throne, determined to end this monster's reign, before it ever got started.

The cold grasp of his hand on my arm stopped me and I glanced back into his snake eyes.

“Do you take me for a fool, make believe Queen? Tell us where it is and my men will go and attest to your honesty, while you stay here.”

I coolly gestured toward the throne. “The gold chambers lie beyond the throne, but only a Candace may go near the throne. Any others attempting it will find their way into an early grave.”

“We’ll see about that. You, you and you go check out her story.”

Three of the armed men stepped over the gold link chain that divided the room and started out across the large, square, marble slab floor.

A slab flipped vertical on one of the men and the man’s cries faded, as he fell headlong down into an uncharted dark void below the floor. The other two men, paralyzed in fear, stood where they were. Heinrich practically screamed, “Well, go on!”

The farthest man took a step and the tile held for a moment and then abruptly flipped. The man tried to catch himself, but fell through as his head banged on a floor slab.

He fell unconscious into the depths below the floor. The last man, with a panicked cry, ran back toward us and, on his third step, a floor slab he’d already walked on before unexpectedly flipped and he fell.

He tried grabbing onto the slick marble, but it was too slippery and with one last horror stricken glance at us, he fell screaming into the abyss.

Heinrich turned to me and backhanded me across the face. “Why didn’t you tell me the floor was rigged?”

“Because I was hoping you would be fool enough to step out on it!” I fired back.

“Only a Candace may approach the throne of Sheba!” I reiterated.

He pulled a pistol and pressed the muzzle to my temple. He was furious, any angrier and he’d be frothing at the mouth. He moved the pistol away to take aim on Flint.

“Can the floor be fixed?” he asked.

“Yes, it can, but only from the other side.”

“Then go fix it and if you betray me again, your lover will pay the penalty most severely!”

I turned from him, as he let my arm go, and approached the dividing chain. I picked up the golden chain and jerked hard on the left side wall anchor. The entire grid of marble floor tiles flipped and stood on end. I jerked hard on the right wall anchor. Nothing happened for a moment, but then the sound of rushing air flooded into the chamber, from where it was being captured by the use of funnels located on the African plain above.

The sound increased to a blaring roar. An air gate flipped and the air was dispersed through different flute like channels throughout the room. A lilting mysterious melody of musical notes began to play. The melody was an old one.

It was said that Solomon himself had composed it for the Queen of Sheba. Its name was simply ‘The Queen’s Dance’ and I had hoped to never have to dance it for real.

The old Candace had never let me attempt it for real, but she had laid out a pattern on the floor and had made me practice it over and over.

I was grateful for that repetition now, as I listened for the key lilting high notes, as the fluted melody filled the cavern with an ancient rhythm. What I was about to attempt was by no means easy.

Several Candace’s had plunged to their deaths in the quest for Sheba’s throne and seen for themselves what lay below the floor.

I stepped out, “Lisa!”

I heard Flint call out desperately, but I didn’t look back. All my concentration was on what I had to do. As my foot fell downward the floor slab flipped flat and held my weight. I swung away in a twirl. Two more slabs flipped flat and caught me in my sideways spin.

This wasn’t a game of hop scotch; if I didn’t bend my torso, and arch the rest of my body in the sinuousness of the dance, just right, my timing would be thrown off and I would be either too late or

too soon to reach a tile and thus plunge to my own death.

The dance across the shifting floor first took me to the left and then back to the right, until I was tantalizingly close to the other side and the overwhelming instinct was to just lunge for it, but I didn't. To have done that would have been fatal.

The music played on and I continued to dance, as my bare feet landed on each tile securely. I was almost two seconds off in my timing and I fought down the fear that was welling up in me, as I focused hard on correcting the time difference.

The dance brought me back towards where I had started. I caught a glimpse of my spectator's faces and I saw that they were completely spellbound, as they watched me. This dance had enthralled ancient court halls and enticed the amorous affections of one king in particular.

Sheba had taken her special dance a step further in the design of her private throne room. This floor's mechanism of revolving stone weights and complex load splitters, all perfectly timed to the beats of a melody, was more complex than any Rubix Cube could ever hope to be. The design had been yet one more gift from her lover king to the north.

Sheba had decided that if future Queens were worthy enough to be called Candace and wished the honor of sitting on her throne, then they would have to dance like her too.

I was headed for the central stair on the other side and I felt the thrill of triumph course through my veins, even as a drop of sweat burned into my eye.

Perhaps the scariest part of the dance was about to happen. I wheeled to face the group on a spin and then I pushed off, as I somersaulted over backwards. My hand caught me in a head stand on a tile several feet away and, in a controlled motion, my shoulders, then my back, connected with recently flipped tiles as I rolled up to my feet and stepped onto the threshold before the stairs of the throne.

The music stopped and every floor tile flipped open. My eyes lifted to the throne high above me and I started up the stairs, which only Queens had ever walked upon.

There were two pedestals to either side of the throne and I reached out for what they each held, the royal scepter and the Queens' crown. It was my crown now by right. I placed the elegantly jeweled creation on my head and sat down on the throne of Sheba.

I truly was Candace now and I felt like it, too. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Marshawn tugging a reluctant Flint away from the pillar I had leaned him up against and down the hall I had indicated earlier.

To keep the spell bound attention of the rest; I inserted the scepter into a slot on the throne and twisted.

The floor tiles flipped flat and I beckoned to the group at large to approach. They seemed to break out of their stunned amazement and came to their senses, but they didn't notice Marshawn or Flint's absence, as they had been standing away from the group.

They sent my father and half brothers across the floor first, as security for Heinrich's men to see if the floor would hold, if they only knew how my finger itched to send my own family plummeting into the depths.

I had to take them all out though. Heinrich quickly darted across the floor and started to climb the stairs up to me. His eyes were full of the avarice of his greed and his insane thirst for power.

He took aim on my head with his pistol and chuckled, as if from some private joke. He was going to kill me.

"Aren't you going to verify the existence of your treasure?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow upward.

Remembrance flickered in his eyes and he glanced at the darkened doorway behind me. His eyes shined with a fiery intensity of yearning, as he licked his lips, while staring at the open doorway beyond the throne.

I shook my head, "Admittedly, I don't know my Bible as well as I should, but I have to admit my recent experiences in life have only illustrated the truth to be found in 1st Timothy 6:10. Are you familiar with the verse, Heinrich?"

He gazed at me in sheer hatred.

"I guess not then. For your benefit, I'll refresh your memory, it goes something like this, 'The love of money is the root of all evil.' Remember now, Heinrich? There's nothing wrong with possessing such a treasure, as lies beyond that door, but you've let it consume you."

"Shut up! Shut up I say!" screamed Heinrich. He pointed the gun at me again, as I sat on my throne.

"Tsk, tsk, on the verge of your greatest achievement and your afraid to go any further. Are you out of your league Heinrich? Doesn't sound very superior of you now does it?"

"Enough!" Heinrich said, truly incensed now.

"Watch her, while I verify the treasure!" he said, as he stormed past me toward the open doorway.

He stepped into the darkened doorway. With an audible click, a stone in the floor depressed beneath his foot and he stopped.

"Should have had me go on before you Heinrich, bum move on your part this time," I said savagely from my seated position on the throne.

"What?" he asked sickly, only moments before thousands upon thousands of gallons of water pounded out of the open doorway and from the holes in the ceiling all along the length of the throne room.

I sat on the throne, as the water sheeted out around it and gushed down the steps carrying away Heinrich's henchmen. A stone slab door slammed downward into the entrance of the treasure room that we had come through earlier.

The treasure room was also flooding with water, beyond the stone slab. I saw nothing of Heinrich or my father, in the turbulent pool that was rapidly rising before me. Those still able to make their way ran down the open doorways on the left that water was draining out through.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of two men slogging through the water pouring out of the single doorway on the right. It was my father and Rocco. They were going to get away!

I couldn't allow that!

I continued to sit, as the water rose to the top of the steps and then it stopped. I turned the scepter in its slot and the floor reopened and drained the water, with its protesting human debris into the great void below. I was left alone in the dripping wet throne room.

There was a crumbling sound and a shuddering of the surrounding walls as the treasure room, beyond the stone slab, collapsed and fell into the void below, over which it had been precariously supported for centuries.

All that remained was this throne room and the rooms that lay behind the throne; not much to be a Queen over.

I walked back down the golden stairs and replaced my crown and scepter, from where I had taken them off the two pedestals. My rule as Queen was over, because I had found something better in life than the ancient secrets of this place.

Perhaps one of my daughters would want to be a Candace someday. I kind of hoped not, as the role had seldom been a happy one through the years. Even Sheba had died, separated, alone and away from the great fling of her life.

I wasn't going to be like that. I was going to follow my heart instead. I climbed the stairs and went through the darkened doorway, not giving the ornate throne and the figure head above a second look. Solomon had said it best in two reflections, "All is vanity" and "there is nothing new under the sun."

The hall I walked in grew lighter again and I passed by the rooms to either side of the hall. They weren't filled with gold, but with treasure of a different kind, none the less.

At the end of the hall I pressed several stones and the private chambers of the Candace opened up before me.

The elegant linens of the bed and the colorful murals of the walls held no fascination for me today,

as they had for countless hours when I was younger.

An elegant burial casket dominated the room and I went to it, reflecting on the one time wisdom of its occupant.

She had known that I was the last to rule here and that I would finish the job of protecting the treasure forever.

“Thank you old friend, for everything,” I whispered, as I ran my hand over the carved outward features of the Candace’s sarcophagus, which was overlaid with gold.

It showed her as she had been in her youth, not as the old, crippled and weary woman that had taught me everything I had needed to know and so much more.

She had given me a break from the harshness of my life up until then and the tools to become free of it as well.

I pressed a golden seamed ridge on the sarcophagus and a shallow tray slid out from the side. I picked up the necklace, which glowed up at me from the tray and I put it on. This, I would take with me.

The necklace consisted of several shimmering blue stones that were unadorned and not faceted. They seemed to glow from within and I did not doubt that they were the rarest element to be found on Earth and for a good reason, too. They had not originated here, but had fallen as part of a meteorite long ago into the desert, the Candace had told me.

The stones had several unique properties, one of which I intended to exploit. I stripped off my clothes, until I was naked.

I went to a chest and pulled out the embroidered linen garments of a Queen and put them on. I pulled my hair back and snapped a golden loop into it.

I put on the jewelry and even the makeup of a Queen. I glanced in the mirror and was pleased with what I saw. I looked the part that I had already been living.

Nervously I turned toward the corner of the room and the shelves that were there. I walked closer and saw her lying there on the shelf, faithful to her master even long after her passing.

“Hello Za’esha. I’m really hoping that you remember me. Remember those big fat mice I used to feed you?”

The large, female, black Mamba’s head rose up regally, as she regarded me. I let her study me for a moment, with her beady eyes and flickering tongue, before I reached out my hand to her.

The stone slid closed behind me, as I stepped out into the hall. I made my way through the dimness to the brightness of the skylight alcove. The alcove was circular, with a fountain in the middle of it that still flowed with water.

I glanced at the stone floor and saw drops of blood here and there. Marshawn and Flint had passed by here not too long ago. Flint was still bleeding.

My heart squeezed and I ached to rush after them, but I couldn’t, not yet. I heard the scrape of a shoe on stone and I turned to see my father and Rocco step into the light given off by the skylight high above.

My father stumbled forward, as he clutched at his chest. His words were slurred, but still discernible.

“You destroyed the treasure! You are a disgrace!”

Turning to Rocco he screamed, “Kill her!”

Rocco smiled evilly and walked across the space toward me. I didn’t resist, as his hands closed around my throat.

“Any last words sister?”

I smiled into Rocco’s eyes, “I remember once hearing you complain about your tattoo itching. You

should feel what a real one feels like.”

His eyes gazed at me, puzzled by my words, and then I watched them go wide with terror as Za’esha’s head came out from under my hair.

His hands let go of my throat, but it was too late. Za’esha sprang forward, sinking her fangs deeply into Rocco’s neck. Choking, his hands clutched at his throat as he stumbled backward, his eyes still fixed on the serpent’s head that was watching him die.

“Kind of ironic for you Rocco, to be bitten by your own self stylized art,” I said, watching him die dispassionately.

Rocco tumbled to the floor and lay twitching and gasping for a moment and then he was still. My eyes traced over to my father’s horrified gaze.

I lifted my arm out toward him and Za’esha’s head disappeared back inside the linen wrap I wore, only to moments later coast down my arm. She wrapped around my outstretched arm for support, as she rose impressively up into the air to stare my father directly in the eye.

Adult Mambas are very long and so was Za’esha. She still had an entire coil wrapped around my waist under my loose garments.

“You’re going to kill me now, aren’t you?” My father asked, his eyes trained on the mamba’s bobbing head.

“No, I’m not. You deserve to be killed, but I’m not going to dirty my hands and do you the favor of putting you out of your misery. Instead, I’m going to let you have what you’ve always wanted.”

I gestured with my other hand to the open hallway behind him, “The way lies before you. Go, spend as much time, with what’s left of the treasure, as you want. A treasure, which you’ve used up most of your life trying to find.”

He glanced back at the way he had come and I could see that returning to the treasure held no fascination for him now.

“I need a doctor!” he said in the most placating tone that I’d ever before heard usher forth from his mouth. One could even say it sounded like he was begging.

“You need far more than just a doctor, but you’ll have to be content with the treasure instead. Contentment is a virtue that you should have taken the time to learn, father. If you had, you might even now still be enjoying your millions of dollars and the constantly revolving line of new female acquisitions. Thankfully, for all the innocent lives you would have crushed, you’re not, instead you’re here, now enjoy it!”

I stooped down and Za’esha slithered onto the floor. I was relieved to feel her gone. Snakes weren’t my thing, but I was now more grateful than ever that the Candace had insisted on her snake lessons as well.

Something in the necklace stones helped to docile the snake’s fickle attitudes, but it by no means made the handler any less susceptible from receiving a bite, if not careful. I straightened back up.

“If you get tired of your treasure, father, you may ask Za’esha for permission to leave.”

I turned and made my way swiftly down the way Flint and Marshawn had gone.

Iya made as if to follow his daughter, but quickly backed away as Za’esha lashed out threateningly. Iya slumped down to the floor, with his back against the wall, as he felt his heart fail within him.

He could only wait now and, when he got tired of waiting, the answer to his solution lay coiled up on the floor, cutting off his only escape.

He shook his head regretfully; everything had been such a waste. No pleasure he had ever experienced in life could take away the sting of the knowledge of what came next. He had no more time to figure it out.

Za'asha hatefully watched the invader of her mistress's domain and waited. She had nothing but time.

I saw them up ahead and I ran to catch up. They were stopped in front of a stone slab that blocked off the hall. I saw Flint turn his head and, when he saw me running toward him, I saw such a look of relief come over his face that I felt warm and gooey all over again. I rushed up to him, checking his face.

"Are you okay? I saw blood, are you still bleeding?" I asked worriedly.

"I'll be okay Lisa, but let's get out of here."

I glanced nervously from one to the other of the two men.

"Neither of you are going to like this next part. I don't much care for it myself. This necklace will protect you, but you have to be touching me."

Flint and Marshawn glanced at each other and then in unison asked, "Protect, from what?"

I turned back to the stone slab, "Put one of your hands on my shoulders and whatever you do, do not let go!"

After a moment of hesitation, both men put a free hand on my bare shoulders. I pushed the stone pads of the slab before me and it slid to the side.

"Oh hell!" Flint exclaimed.

Marshawn echoed pretty much the same, only it was in French.

"Don't let go!" I reiterated.

Both hands gripped down on my shoulders painfully, but I didn't blame them. We stepped out into the cave. It was a snake cave.

Snakes came down here to get away from the heat of the day. There were all kinds and lots of them were poisonous, but they slithered out of the way and, after about a hundred feet, we stepped out into the daylight.

I turned around and saw sweat rolling off both men and I couldn't help but tease them slightly, in repayment for the bruises that were already beginning to form on my shoulders from their death grips on me, "Now, that wasn't too scary, was it?"

They looked back at the nondescript hole in the ground we had just crawled out of and both of them shuddered. I laughed, before starting out into the scrub brush.

We rounded a clump of shrubs and there sat the chopper. Flint shook his head, grinning, and awkwardly attempted to give me a half bow, as he leaned against Marshawn.

"Might I ask why we didn't just take the shortcut earlier today?" he asked.

I tapped the necklace, "Wouldn't have gotten far in that cave without this."

"Hey, I could have brought along a flame thrower, if I had known the job called for one."

I rolled my eyes and headed for the chopper. Marshawn helped Flint into the chopper.

"You're sure you can fly this with the way you're shot up?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

"Perhaps a better way of putting it would be, 'Should you be flying?'" I asked again.

"Just get in and buckle up, would you Lisa!" he responded testily and I gave up on my cautionary safety measures.

I turned to Marshawn and did something I had never before done with any of my fellow siblings. I hugged him hard and, after a moment, he returned it.

Drawing back I brushed the tears from my face, "Thank you so much! We couldn't have done this without you!"

He looked at me, his eyes curious, "What made you trust me?"

I reached up and touched his face, "I've known that you were different ever since that day they beat

me up, tied me to the dock post and were going to leave me there to drown in the evening tide. You came back and cut me free. Why did you do that, Marshawn? I've always wondered."

He shrugged, "Your mother was very kind to my mother, when she needed someone the most. She was also kind to me, after father sold my mother to some whore house in Asia. I thought I'd repay the favor."

I nodded. "What are you going to do now, Marshawn?"

His face brightened up, "I have a business in France. Father doesn't know anything about it."

Now that was a surprise. "What do you do?"

A little embarrassed he said, "I make boats."

I smiled, "You always were whittling out small boats and sailing them out to sea. I'm happy for you! Now, whether you like it or not, I'm going to give you some big sister advice. Keep your business legal and be fair in your business dealings. Find a nice girl and make sure she's the right one. Then settle down and enjoy the rest of your life. And above all don't forget about God in the process of living!"

He grinned, "Yes, my Queen."

"See that you do it!" I finished firmly, before smiling. I took my golden earrings out and pressed them into his hand.

"These should get you to France, and knowing how smart you are, I bet you have a nest egg or two to pave the rest of your way in life."

His grin was answer enough to that, too.

I turned to the chopper.

"Lisa."

I looked back.

"You go enjoy your life now too!"

I smiled wide, "I plan on it, little brother!"

I got in and met Flint's gaze, "Ready?" he asked.

I settled into the seat, "Take me away from all this, Flint!"

He nodded and fired up the chopper. Excitement began to build, as we left everything old behind.

Chapter Sixteen

New Life

I spent the night curled up on a hospital bed beside a protesting Flint. Despite every test the doctors could run, all the results returned a positive verdict. Flint was one healthy animal, didn't even have an infection.

The nurses practically had to tie him to the bed and he only relented when I promised not to leave his side. It was very obvious that Flint held no love for doctors or hospitals.

I wasn't exactly sure which he hated more, but I sensed a story there somewhere that I would have to pry out of him someday. Heck, I didn't even know his real name yet.

The next morning Flint was discharged or, better put, expelled, from the hospital in Cairo. Two false IDs saw us onto a plane and I was in Vienna before I knew it. Flint took care of everything and just enjoyed the experience.

He took me shopping and completely spoiled me rotten. He spent money faster than even my father could and I could only assume that he had plenty of it, by the way he went through it. It didn't matter really.

I was with him and that was all I cared about. That evening, after my shopping spree, our taxi dropped us off at one of those ultra swanky hotels, where the doormen wear more brass than a five star general.

Flint led me commandingly into the lobby and I couldn't but be impressed with the stated opulence of the old world finery about me. Flint didn't even bother to stop at the check in desk to give them a passport or anything.

He must be a regular here, if the way every hired person was deferentially nodding and smiling at him was any clue. Just who was Flint?

The elevator doors opened up and a man stepped out and instantly smiled, as he saw Flint, "Good to see you, James!"

Flint returned the smile and said something that I missed out on, as I was too caught up in the 'James' part.

James what?

The possibility had me cringing. After the gilded elevator doors slid shut he turned from the buttons to eye me speculatively.

We were alone on the elevator and I burst out with my question, "James what?"

"James Kilroy."

It was the same name that he had used in Barcelona.

"You can relax now, Lisa. I'm not an international secret agent playboy."

James Kilroy. I liked it. It suited him. But in a way, he would always be Flint to me.

"That's your real name?" I asked skeptically.

He smiled and held one hand out, level and the other hand up, "I so swear."

I rolled my eyes and glanced at the elevator floor numbers. We were almost to the top. I glanced nervously at him.

A hotel like this, the upper floors must surely be penthouse suites?

Could he really afford all this, legitimately?

"Lisa?"

I glanced at him, from where he was studying me, as he leaned against the red velvet lining of the

side of the elevator.

"I own this hotel and several others like it."

My mouth fell open just as we reached the top floor and the doors opened. Yeah, it was a penthouse alright!

Flint, I mean James, practically had to push me out of the elevator, into the lavishly appointed space. The doors shut and James did something to lock the elevator doors. I spun slightly to regard him behind me.

He smiled charmingly, "Now we won't be bothered by anyone. This floor is locked off for the evening."

Nervous and anxious weren't enough to describe how I felt right now. I wasn't sure I was ready for what came next. I thought I had been, but now I wasn't so sure.

James went to a table, pulled out a chair to face me and sat down. The intensity of his gaze had me blushing.

"I think I've waited long enough, take your clothes off Lisa. All of them."

"I...." I stammered, as I didn't know what to say, this wasn't happening like I had planned.

He was the man I wanted, but I this wasn't right.

I found my voice, "A very wise old woman once told me that a girl should have a ring before..... before this." I finished lamely, shifting from one high heeled foot to the other, as I indicated the two of us in a nervous gesture.

"But Lisa, you do have a ring. Actually, you have two rings," he said softly.

I glanced down at the beautiful rings on my finger.

"Yes, but these aren't for real!" I said.

"Aren't they?" he asked, while gazing intently at me.

I looked at the rings again; I slipped them off and looked for an inscription. It was there, "*Yours truly forever, James Kilroy.*"

I looked up, my eyes moist, "That's sweet, but it still doesn't make us married."

"Perhaps not, but this does."

He pulled a folded up paper out of his coat pocket and held it out to me. I stepped closer. What could he possibly have?

His eyes were twinkling, as I took the paper and opened it up.

To my shock it was a marriage license certificate and my name was signed in indelible blue ink at the bottom of the page right next to James Kilroy. "You forged my signature?" I asked incredulously.

"Now, that would be illegal," he said with a wink.

"You're saying that I signed this?"

"As a matter of fact you did."

"When? I never... " I stopped.

"Your yappy old friend in Barcelona! You slipped this one in with all those papers! You tricked me!"

"Guilty."

He slid his chair back, as he painfully knelt to the floor before me and took my hand. "Lisa Tauranto would you please do me the honor of becoming my wife and put me out of the misery of a life spent without you by my side."

There was no joking in his eyes and what could I say but "Yes!" and kiss him.

Kissing him reminded me of everything there was between us and my nervousness went away. I helped him to his feet, pressed up against him, and folded my hands around the back of his neck, as his big hands closed in on my waist and slipped around to grip my rear.

I was still slightly miffed about the way he'd tricked me, so I decided a little more teasing was in order. "You know, I'm not quite sure we're married yet!" I said, cocking my head to the side, looking

serious.

“After all, we’ve said no vows.” I added.

He spilled out the whole marriage vow mantra in fast forward, as if he knew it by heart.

“Say, I do,” he finished.

“I do,” I said, somewhat startled.

He pointed at himself figuratively, “I do too. I now pronounce us man and wife; I may now kiss my bride.”

I stopped his head's descent by placing my hand over his mouth, as I looked at him in shock, “You’re a preacher, too!”

He shrugged, “Admittedly it’s a bit of a gray area. Technically James Kilroy isn’t, but one of my aliases is. You wouldn’t believe the things people will tell a man of the cloth.”

I just shook my head in wonder, “Will I ever know all there is to know about you, James Kilroy?”

His eyes turned serious and he brought up one of my hands to lay over his heart. “Whatever I’ve been, whatever I’ve done and whatever I do from here on out, the very best part of me will always be yours.”

I kissed him. We were both breathing heavy when we broke apart. James looked down at my neckline and said, “I think it’s time that the Empress lost her clothes.”

I gave him a sultry look and leaned up to whisper in his ear, “Only if you promise to punish me for stealing your tablet, like you said you would.”

His face grew red, but his gaze didn’t falter from mine in the slightest. “I can arrange that.”

I arched up an eyebrow commandingly, as I began to unbutton the front of my blouse, “See that you do.”

He shook his head, “You’re such a sexy queen, don’t ever change.”

“Your wish is my command, sire.”

Our honeymoon was the best two weeks of my life. I never would have believed life could be so good. How had I missed out on so much of life before now?

Didn’t matter, I was catching up now on lost time and experiences.

The top was down on the convertible, the sun was warm and the breeze blowing my hair out behind me was refreshing. I opened my eyes and stared at my man behind the wheel. I loved him so much!

We had just driven our way through Europe for our honeymoon. No schedule, just each other with no interruptions. I didn’t even know where we were right now and I didn’t really care to know.

Out of idle curiosity though I asked, “Where are we?”

He looked over and smiled, but I couldn’t see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

“Italy, Tuscany to be exact.”

I reached over and traced the outline of the muscles in his forearm as he gripped the wheel, “And what will we be doing here?” I asked suggestively.

“I’m taking you home.”

I sat up straighter in the seat, a sense of nervousness hitting me.

“You’ve never told me that you have a family!” I said, frantically trying to comb my hair into some semblance of order.

He shook his head, “I have a brother, but we don’t talk. All I have is you and some close friends that I work with.”

I caught the sad note underlying his words and I reached out and touched his face, “I’m sorry. On the brighter side though, that makes two of us, alone in the world, that now have each other to hold onto.”

We were quiet for a while and then he glanced over at me curiously, “Were you nervous about

meeting my family, if I had any?"

"Heck yeah!" I exclaimed.

"Why?" he asked genuinely clueless. I just stared at him, as if he was missing it big time.

He spoke up to defend himself from my obvious look of consternation.

"I can understand some nervousness I suppose over meeting new people for the first time, but in terms of being excepted, what's not to approve about you? You're highly intelligent, successful in your own right and utterly gorgeous!"

With emphasis I stated somewhat bitterly, "I'm half black with Italian features and hair, and sport a healthy dose of Jewish blood! Any one of those three, or a combination of them, is enough to arouse prejudice in just about everyone."

He shook his head and said, "Personally speaking, I thought I'd never seen a better combination of fifty percent of Adam and fifty percent of Eve, as when I first saw you. My thinking hasn't changed any since I've known you either."

I looked down and then away as I said, "I'm really grateful for that, but that's not how the world looks at me. I wish there were more people like you in the world, I really do!"

His touch on my arm had me turning my head back to him. He'd taken his sunglasses off and I could see his eyes now, which were serious in their intent. "Forget the world! I'm just grateful that someone exactly like you exists in this world, just for me!"

I nodded, smiling a little. It was so amazing to have an articulate and powerfully dominant man such as James so completely enamored with every facet of me. It was the best confidence booster I'd ever had in life.

"We'll be home soon."

I had forgotten about that, as I had been so lost in thinking down on myself. I looked around at the countryside around me and had to admit I hadn't seen much in life more beautiful than these rolling hills.

It seemed to connect with some deep part of me and I stared with interest at the passing scenery. We exited off the main road, such as it was, and started down a private drive. We passed rows and rows of idyllic grape arbors, pastures and orchards.

I glanced over, a little breathless, "Is all this yours?"

"Yes, and so is that," he said, pointing, and I looked up ahead.

I gasped at the beautiful, sprawling, red tiled villa that lay before us located upon a gentle rise of land. It was like a fairy tale!

Was I really going to get to live in such an amazing place? We passed through a massive wrought iron gate that broke up the wall surrounding the huge villa. The architecture was warm and exquisite in every detail.

The profusion of flowers and the entire, artfully landscaped setting of the villa was spectacular. The car pulled up under a pillared archway and the smell of flowers wafted into the open space of the car. I felt like I'd just won something far better than the lottery.

Half laughing, I turned to James, eager to see the rest of his home that was now also my home. The laughter fell from my face as I saw the seriousness of his gaze.

"What's wrong James?" I asked, feeling alarm at the seriousness that I saw.

"Do you believe in coincidence Lisa?"

"I... I'm not sure, why do you ask?"

He didn't directly answer my question, but continued on with his own thought.

"I used to believe in coincidence, but not anymore. Instead, I think a lot of what transpires in life that is termed coincidence is, in fact, the hand of God at work. Seven years ago, I reached a critical point in my life. I was lost, for lack of a better way of putting it. I had my work, which has always been meaningful, but my life just felt empty somehow. I decided I needed to make some changes, because in some ways I'd given up on wanting to continue living. I was jaded by the pointless quality

of my life, so to speak. I decided to make my life less pointless. I went back to church and discovered a lot of what I had been missing. I cultivated a few friendships that didn't relate to my work. I'd always given generously, but I'd never given generously of my time. It was an eye opening experience and the biggest thing it helped me to do was stop feeling sorry for myself, because of what I had suffered through as a child. Around that time it occurred to me that I needed some place to call home. I had my hotels, but they were never really home. I started looking around and it took about a year before I found what I was looking for; this place. It was pretty run down at the time, but even then I could see the charm and former glory of the place. What I liked most was the privacy of it and it was relatively cheap for its location and acreage. It was a foreclosure and I snatched it up. It wasn't till after I bought it that I learned from the bank that, with my purchase, I would be evicting the old woman and her two daughters that lived with her on the property. That didn't set right with me, especially as they weren't seeing a dime of the purchase price of their estate that had been within their family since Roman times. I met with them and offered to let them stay. In return, I asked for them to help take care of it while I was gone on business and to help me restore it to its former glory as well."

"That was very sweet of you," I interjected softly.

He shrugged as if it was no big deal, but I could well imagine what a big deal it had been to those three women.

He continued on with his story, "It took a while, but with their very helpful advice the place became what you see it as today. It is very much the home that I never really had before and I cherish my time here. As time went on, I learned more from the three women, who in their own way have all become like doting mothers to me, of the story of why such a once proud and prominent family had become so indebted. Theirs is a sad story, full of heartbreak. The Contessa was born here, but she had no brother to inherit so a marriage to another prominent family was arranged. Arranged marriages were fast going out of style, but both families were still locked in the old of traditions of the past and the Contessa was married to a man she did not love, out of duty to her family. On the surface everything appeared to be fine, but the Contessa knew her husband was no good. In twenty years he spent and gambled his way through the bulk of the family's wealth. He kept the depleted wealth a secret, until his creditors threatened to expose him if they didn't get the money that was owed them. To one of his noble birth and standing, the social disgrace that would result from such an exposure meant everything. So he went about finding a way out of his dilemma before he was socially disgraced. The Contessa had blessed him with three beautiful daughters, which he had largely ignored up to that point. An idea occurred to him and he acted on it. He had his oldest daughter kidnapped and sold her in a black market sex slave auction. She brought a very high price. No one suspected what he had done. Instead, the family received the well wishes and prayers of the entire worldwide high society for their loss. Five years passed and the count was back in the same hole as before and in desperate need of money to keep his charade of wealth and prominence going. His plan had worked so well the first time, why not try again? This time he kidnapped both of his remaining daughters and sold them in the same manner he had his oldest daughter. The outcry over the kidnappings was epic, even more so than the first one. An intensive investigation was enacted, but the count had covered his tracks well. He even put up a reward for the return of the girls. This time, however, he was caught. Strangely enough, it was his creditors that helped lead to his arrest. Apparently selling one's own children into sexual bondage was something even lower than their low standards could tolerate. They had thought it strange the first time he had become suddenly flush with money, the second time they knew something was wrong and they came forward with what they knew about the count. The count was tried, convicted and sent off to rot in jail, where he didn't last long. The black market ring was broken up, but there was no sign of the girls. The Contessa took the blood money and spent it in search of all three daughters. When it was gone, she sold the rest of the family's holdings. When that was gone, she sold everything of value within the villa and mortgaged the estate to the hilt. Four years

after the last kidnapping, the second oldest daughter managed to escape from a Middle Eastern sheik's harem. Later that same year, the youngest daughter was rescued from a Brazilian oil tycoon's residence. The Contessa continued to search for her oldest daughter, but the trail had gone cold and she could never find her. With all the family's wealth gone and essentially existing on the charity of others, she was forced to give up the search for her."

Tears fell in a steady river down my face as I listened, not wanting to believe, but knowing he wasn't lying to me.

"Then, in the course of my work, I heard chatter of a treasure of legend being hunted for by a lot of international entities. My associates and I looked into it and, surprisingly, found good bones to back up the possible existence of such a treasure. It became immediately clear what a disaster such a treasure could wreck, in anyone's hand. So we went about finding it too, only we intended to destroy it. As I delved into the history of the treasure, I learned about the Candace's, in particular the last one, and then the rumor that she'd had a protégé for two years. I traced the girl back to Iya Muatombo and found out his part in the whole deal. I'd had a run in with him in previous years, so I kept my distance. But I did find out that the girl ran away and got a description of her. Later, a savvy New York detective butts into my fact finding mission. You matched the descriptions and I was almost positive it was you. You verified it when you went to see your father. I paid your father a visit, like I told you, and he told me your life's story. In the process, he told me about where he had gotten your mother and I couldn't believe it. In a way I think I had known there was something familiar about you, but I couldn't place it until he told me what he did. I know this is hard for you Lisa, and I'm going to help you get through every step of it."

He got out of the car and came around to my side and opened the door.

He extended his hand to help me out, but I shook my head no, "I can't! I need more time!"

"There's already been too much time Lisa," he said, as he stooped and pulled me up out of the car.

I resisted his advance toward the huge front doors, but the steady firm pressure of his hand on the small of my back forced me along.

"Please, James! Please don't make me face this!" I begged.

"I love you and I'll be with you every step of the way, darling."

The big doors opened and I stepped into the cool interior of the villa's foyer. The villa's grandness held no allure for me right now, all that registered was the gentle pressure of James' hand pushing me onward.

We stopped at a closed door and James reached for the handle. I caught his hand. He pulled my hand up and kissed it, before opening the door wide to reveal an elegant sitting room.

He stepped behind me and pressed me deeper into the room, as he whispered encouragements and endearments into my ear that kept my feet moving forward.

The room held three occupants. Two instantly rose to their feet, their hands gripped anxiously together. A third, gray haired figure rose up more slowly. They all became more clear to me as I drew nearer. The light olive skinned features paired with the black curly hair were a match for my own darker skinned features. It was really true!

This really was my family!

The older, gray haired lady, still beautiful even despite the depth of the sorrows of her life, approached steadily, her cheeks wet with tears. Her hands rose up to frame my face and I saw a world of kindness and love in her eyes and I felt myself begin to lose it.

"Oh, my precious dear! It's okay, you're safe now!"

I lost it then and pressed my face down onto her time worn shoulder and cried. My two aunts closed in on me from the sides and I felt their arms close tight about me, even as their tears started to dampen my dress. I was home, at long last.

James stepped back, as he rubbed the moisture off his cheeks. He loved Lisa more than life itself and he couldn't help but get a little emotional at the outpouring of so much grief and despair now gone, to be replaced with the vibrancy of the present.

He hadn't told Lisa everything. He'd said the three women had acted like mothers to him, but the truth was, they were the only motherly figures he'd ever known, for the most part.

He didn't remember his father, and his mother was but a vague memory. His upbringing had been as tumultuous, if not worse, than Lisa's had been.

In his love for the three women, who had showered him with nurturing affection, he had continued the Contessa's search for her long lost daughter using the resources available to him.

He had spent millions, but got nowhere. As happy as he was for Lisa in this moment, he was just as happy for the other three women as well.

Lisa was a good six inches taller than the other women, but somehow the Contessa's face appeared and she crooked a finger at him, as she held her granddaughter to her tightly.

He had been summoned. He stepped forward, reluctant to join the emotional huddle. Her arthritic hand reached out and grasped his, squeezing firmly, as her eyes told him the depth of her gratitude in a way inexpressible by words. It was a good day for all of them.

Chapter Seventeen

Late Start

Five months later

I lay on my side, gazing out the window at the morning sunshine with a silly grin on my face, as I remembered last night.

Last night had been, well a lot of things, all of them very good. I felt the big hand splayed across my hip shift and my breathing hitched up in anticipation of starting the day off the same way as we had left it last night.

James shifted, pecked a good morning kiss on the back of my shoulder and patted my bottom, before abruptly rolling away.

Hey, where did he think he was going?

I turned over to see him sitting up holding his tablet and I knew a moment of extreme jealousy. I tucked the sheet under my arms, which I folded together, while giving him a look.

He glanced at me, "What's the matter with you?"

I turned my gaze towards the ceiling, "Someone poured cold water all over my morning high."

He chuckled, but continued leafing through the tablet in his hands and I was just about to roll over in frustrated jealousy of the technology, when he whistled through his teeth.

I glanced over, "What?"

He looked at me teasingly, "I had no idea that when I married you I was hooking myself up with such an heiress."

I gazed at him blankly and he explained further, "They've finalized your father's estate. He left you everything."

I sat up abruptly and the sheet slipped down, which attracted his admiring gaze. I quickly pulled the sheet back up, not done with punishing him yet for ignoring me earlier.

"What do you mean, everything?"

He handed the tablet to me and I did a double take, "That's, that's over ..." I trailed off.

"A billion!" he interjected. "But don't get your hopes up just yet of joining that exclusive club. After taxes and various garnishments you're left with just over six hundred million."

I shrugged, "Still, that's not too shabby."

I caught him shaking his head at me and I asked, "What?" with a smile.

"Oh, I was just thinking of how probable it is that you'll set the record for how fast six hundred million dollars has ever been given away."

He had me there. I really didn't want anything to do with the money. I already had more than I could have ever have dreamed. It would be best if my father's stolen wealth served some good purpose and James was right to say what he had. I was even now growing excited over the possibilities of what worthy charities to give it all away to.

"What are you going to do with the house?"

I glanced back over at him, "House?" I repeated blankly.

"Yeah, your father's mansion on the island. All of your relatives have been evicted per your father's instructions and the house, if that's what you can call it, is sitting vacant."

So many atrocities had been carried out in that house. They were too numerous to count really.

"I'd like to plant a small nuclear device square in the middle of that heap and blow the whole bloody island up." I said meaningfully, as I stared out into the distance.

“That could be arranged.”

I laughed, glanced over at James and abruptly stopped.

He was serious. He couldn't be!

He had to be pulling my leg! He seemed to know what I was thinking, “A lady of your means could buy about anything she pleased, too.”

I swallowed, “Wouldn't the effects from the blast hurt people on the mainland?” I asked, my voice a little squeaky.

He smiled broadly and I knew I'd been had.

“Bless you for caring about the masses; I knew you had a good heart in you.”

I punched him in the shoulder.

“How about a couple of Hellfire missiles offering localized damage only?”

“Sure!” I replied jokingly.

He grabbed the phone off the table beside him and called someone he had on speed dial.

My eyebrows rose, he was really carrying out this gag. Well, two could play at that.

“Hey Robbie, need a favor. Never mind where I am right now, I need two Hellfires delivered of the shore of North Carolina, what's that gonna cost me? Uh huh, hang on a second.”

He pressed the phone to his shoulder and in a loud whisper asked me, “It's gonna cost six million for two, if you want four missiles it'll be an additional two million.”

Liking the game, I held up four fingers. Why not? What did I have to lose?

“She'll take four, Robbie. None of your concern, as to who she is, when can you have it done? Uh huh. I'll text you the coordinates.”

He hung up the phone and recaptured his tablet from me.

I just smirked at him. What was he up to, besides getting in over his head? He handed the tablet back to me.

The screen was full of the image of the big white house poised on the hill of the island.

“So, when was this taken?” I asked skeptically.

“It wasn't, that's real time satellite telemetry you're looking at.”

“Sure,” I said with a smirk. “What's the clock up in the corner for?”

“ETA.”

A little frisson of alarm coursed through me, “Estimated arrival of what?”

He held up four fingers.

“You're joking, right?” I asked him, not believing this was really going to happen.

“You get what you pay for with Robbie.”

My gaze drifted back to the tablet in horrified fascination, thirty seven seconds. I watched the seconds tick by. I could see the waves moving. Either this was a video or it really was actual satellite imagery.

How did James have access to this?

5..4..3.. I saw the streaks and then the white mansion exploded, as it was struck on all four corners by missiles. I shrieked and almost dropped the tablet. I swear I felt the concussion of the blasts through the device.

The mansion was a shattered, raging inferno and numbly I looked up into James boyishly grinning face.

“Fun isn't it?” he asked.

“Who are you?” I exclaimed.

He winked conspiratorially and said, “You have your secrets and I have mine.”

“That's not true! I told you where the treasure was. I even led you right to it!” I retorted hotly.

“All of that is technically true; however, there is a lie of omission.”

I grew still and put the burning tablet down, “Explain.”

He put his hands behind his head and leaned back against the pillows with a smirk, “It is true that

you led me to the treasure. But the full truth is that you only showed me a part of it, the lesser part of it I'm willing to wager. Old Heinrich was more right than he knew, it would seem."

My shoulders slumped in defeat and I fell back against the pillows, holding onto the sheet.

I sighed loudly, "Okay, how did you figure it out?"

"The water," he replied cheekily.

"The water?"

"Yes, you see gold, along with other metals such as silver, copper and zinc have a unique effect on water quality. They all kill bacteria and in general purify whatever liquid they are in contact with. That's why the goblets of kings were fashioned out of those metals, as the ancients knew the positive effects of the metals on the contents of the cup. You don't find that quality of water in the African bush just occurring naturally. This is what I think happened. Gold was so plentiful that it really wasn't needed; however, it might be in the future. So, like the salt, they stockpiled it. Where do you hide something, that you're constantly adding to, out of view? The answer, in our case, is under water. For who knows how many years, I bet they pulled those gold caravans up to those outlying water ponds and just dumped in the gold. Those ponds are all collapsed now, but under about thirty feet of debris is an accumulation of wealth in raw gold, which I doubt is equaled anywhere else in the world. Am I right?"

I nodded, yes. "What do you plan on doing with this knowledge?" I asked slowly.

"Nothing, everyone's given up on the treasure, which suites me just fine. I don't care if it stays there forever."

I believed him.

"Now, enough with secrets."

He tugged on the sheet and I let it go.

I glanced over at him coyly, "You really think that you have me all figured out, as well as my secrets, don't you?"

"You betcha!" he responded, his eyes elsewhere.

I rose up over him and pushed him back down into the pillows and waited for his eyes to come back to mine.

"Do you really think that generation after generation of Candace's went to so much trouble and sacrifice to protect a few piles of gold from tomb robbers and fortune seekers?"

His eyes widened and the first words out of his mouth were, "What's in the rooms behind the throne?"

I smiled, relishing my victory, however small it may be. "My lips are sealed," I said, as my lips closed over his in a deep kiss.

It looked like we were destined to yet another late start of another glorious day spent with each other.

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country. It's the best place to be, I'm thinking. I share my life with my beautiful wife, Beth, my three children and one cat named Herman. When I'm not lost in a daydream, the most likely place you'll find me is flower gardening or at the movie theatre. I used to think I was strong, but now I freely admit that I'm weak. My new reality is okay, because Jesus Christ has me covered. It's better that way, trust me!